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"Now it was, you observe, that the kettle began to spend the evening."

The Cricket on the Hearth

By

Charles Dickens

Illustrated by

Frederick Simpson Coburn

New York and London

G. P. Putnam's Sons

The Knickerbocker Press

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THE CRICKET ON THE HEARTH

HE CRICKET ON

CHIRP THE

HE Kettle began
Don't tell me wh
rs. Peerybingle said.
ow better. Mrs. Peer
ngle may leave it
cord to the end of tin
at she could n't sa
hich of them began it
t I say the Kettle di
ought to know, I hope
he Kettle began it fu
e minutes by the litt
axy-faced Dutch cloc
the corner before th
icket uttered a chirp.

As if the clock had n't finished striking, and the convulsive little Haymaker at the top of it, jerking away right and left with a scythe in front of a Moorish Palace, had n't mowed down half an acre of imaginary grass before the Cricket joined in at all !

Why, I am not naturally positive. Everyone knows that. I would n't set my own opinion against the opinion of Mrs. Peerybingle, unless I were quite sure, on any account whatever. Nothing should induce me. But this is a question of fact. And the fact is, that the Kettle began it at least five minutes before the Cricket gave any sign of being in existence. Contradict me, and I 'll say ten.

Let me narrate exactly how it happened. I should have proceeded to do so, in my very first word, but for this plain consideration : if I am to tell a story I must begin at the beginning ; and how is it possible to begin at the beginning, without beginning at the Kettle ?

It appeared as if there were a sort of match, or trial of skill, you must understand, between the Kettle and the Cricket. And this is what led to it, and how it came about.

"A pair of pattens"

Mrs. Peerybingle, going out into the raw twilight, and clicking over the wet stones in a pair of pattens that worked innumerable rough impressions of the first proposition in Euclid all about the yard—Mrs. Peerybingle filled the Kettle at the water-butt. Presently returning, less the pattens (and a good deal less, for they were tall and Mrs. Peerybingle was but short), she set the Kettle on the fire. In doing which she lost her temper, or mislaid it for an instant; for, the water

—being uncomfortably cold, and in that slippy, slushy, sleety sort of state wherein it seems to penetrate through every kind

"*Clicking over the wet stones in a pair of pattens*"

of substance, patten rings included—had laid hold of Mrs. Peerybingle's toes, and even splashed her legs. And when we rather plume ourselves (with reason too) upon our legs, and keep ourselves par-

ticularly neat in point of stockings, we find this, for the moment, hard to bear.

"The lid . . . dived sideways in—down to the very bottom of the Kettle."

Besides, the Kettle was aggravating and obstinate. It would n't allow itself

to be adjusted on the top bar ; it would n't hear of accommodating itself kindly to the knobs of coal ; it would lean forward with a drunken air and dribble, a very Idiot of a Kettle, on the hearth. It was quarrelsome, and hissed and spluttered morosely at the fire. To sum up all, the lid, resisting Mrs. Peerybingle's fingers, first of all turned topsy-turvy, and then, with an ingenious pertinacity deserving of a better cause, dived sideways in— down to the very bottom of the Kettle. And the hull of the *Royal George* has never made half the monstrous resistance to coming out of the water which the lid of that Kettle employed against Mrs. Peerybingle before she got it up again.

It looked sullen and pig-headed enough, even then ; carrying its handle with an air of defiance, and cocking its spout pertly and mockingly at Mrs. Peerybingle, as if it said, "I won't boil. Nothing shall induce me ! "

But Mrs. Peerybingle, with restored

good humour, dusted her chubby little hands against each other, and sat down before the Kettle, laughing. Meantime, the jolly blaze uprose and fell, flashing and gleaming on the little Haymaker at the top of the Dutch clock, until one might have thought he stood stock still before the Moorish Palace, and nothing was in motion but the flame.

He was on the move, however; and had his spasms, two to the second, all right and regular. But his sufferings when the clock was going to strike were frightful to behold; and when a Cuckoo looked out of a trap-door in the Palace, and gave note six times, it shook him, each time, like a spectral voice—or like a something wiry, plucking at his legs.

It was not until a violent commotion and a whirring noise among the weights and ropes below him had quite subsided that this terrified Haymaker became himself again. Nor was he startled without reason; for these rattling, bony skeletons

of clocks are very disconcerting in their operation, and I wonder very much how any set of men, but most of all how Dutchmen, can have had a liking to invent them. For there is a popular belief that Dutchmen love broad cases and much clothing for their own lower selves; and they might know better than to leave their clocks so very lank and unprotected, surely.

Now it was, you observe, that the Kettle began to spend the evening. Now it was that the Kettle, growing mellow and musical, began to have irrepressible gurglings in its throat, and to indulge in short vocal snorts, which it checked in the bud, as if it had n't quite made up its mind yet to be good company. Now it was, that after two or three such vain attempts to stifle its convivial sentiments, it threw off all moroseness, all reserve, and burst into a stream of song so cosy and hilarious, as never maudlin nightingale yet formed the least idea of.

So plain, too! Bless you, you might have understood it like a book — better than some books you and I could name, perhaps. With its warm breath gushing forth in a light cloud which merrily and gracefully ascended a few feet, then hung about the chimney-corner as its own domestic Heaven, it trolled its song with that strong energy of cheerfulness that its iron body hummed and stirred upon the fire; and the lid itself, the recently rebellious lid—such is the influence of a bright example—performed a sort of jig, and clattered like a deaf-and-dumb young cymbal that had never known the use of its twin brother.

That this song of the Kettle's was a song of invitation and welcome to somebody out of doors; to somebody at that moment coming on, towards the snug small home and the crisp fire,—there is no doubt whatever. Mrs. Peerybingle knew it, perfectly, as she sat musing before the hearth. It 's a dark night,

sang the Kettle, and the rotten leaves are lying by the way ; and above, all is mist and darkness, and below, all is mire and clay ; and there 's only one relief in all the sad and murky air ; and I don't

"It's a dark night, sang the Kettle, and the rotten leaves are lying by the way."

know that it is one, for it 's nothing but a glare, of deep and angry crimson, where the sun and wind together set a brand upon the clouds for being guilty of such weather ; and the widest open country is a long dull streak of black ; and there 's

hoar-frost on the finger-post, and thaw upon the track; and the ice it is n't water, and the water is n't free; and you could n't say that anything is what it ought to be; but he 's coming, coming, coming!——

And here, if you like, the Cricket DID chime in! with a Chirrup, Chirrup, Chirrup of such magnitude, by way of chorus; with a voice so astoundingly disproportionate to its size as compared with the Kettle (size! you could n't see it!) that if it had then and there burst itself like an overcharged gun, if it had fallen a victim on the spot and chirruped its little body into fifty pieces, it would have seemed a natural and inevitable consequence, for which it had expressly laboured.

The Kettle had had the last of its solo performance. It persevered with undiminished ardour; but the Cricket took first fiddle and kept it. Good Heaven, how it chirped! Its shrill, sharp, piercing

voice resounded through the house, and seemed to twinkle in the outer darkness like a Star. There was an indescribable little trill and tremble in it, at its loudest, which suggested its being carried off its legs, and made to leap again, by its own intense enthusiasm. Yet they went very well together, the Cricket and the Kettle. The burden of the song was still the same ; and louder, louder, louder still, they sang it in their emulation.

The fair little listener — for fair she was, and young, though something of what is called the dumpling shape, but I don't myself object to that — lighted a candle ; glanced at the Haymaker on the top of the clock, who was getting in a pretty average crop of minutes ; and looked out of the window, where she saw nothing, owing to the darkness, but her own face imaged in the glass. And my opinion is (and so would yours have been) that she might have looked a long way and seen nothing half so agreeable.

"Lighted a candle . . . and looked out of the window where she saw nothing, owing to the darkness, but her own face imaged in the glass."

When she came back and sat down in her former seat, the Cricket and the Kettle were still keeping it up, with a perfect fury of competition—the Kettle's weak side clearly being that he did n't know when he was beat.

There was all the excitement of a race about it. Chirp, chirp, chirp! Cricket a mile ahead. Hum, hum, hum—m—m! Kettle making play in the distance, like a great top. Chirp, chirp, chirp! Cricket round the corner. Hum, hum, hum—m—m! Kettle sticking to him in his own way; no idea of giving in. Chirp, chirp, chirp! Cricket fresher than ever. Hum, hum, hum—m—m! Kettle slow and steady. Chirp, chirp, chirp! Cricket going in to finish him. Hum, hum, hum—m—m! Kettle not to be finished. Until at last they got so jumbled together, in the hurry-skurry, helter-skelter, of the match, that whether the Kettle chirped and the Cricket hummed, or the Cricket chirped and the

Kettle hummed, or they both chirped and both hummed, it would have taken a clearer head than yours or mine to have decided with anything like certainty. But of this, there is no doubt: that the Kettle and the Cricket, at one and the same moment, and by some power of amalgamation best known to themselves, sent, each, his fireside song of comfort streaming into a ray of the candle that shone out through the window, and a long way down the lane. And this light, bursting on a certain person who on the instant approached towards it through the gloom, expressed the whole thing to him, literally in a twinkling, and cried: "Welcome home, old fellow! Welcome home, my Boy!"

This end attained, the Kettle, being dead beat, boiled over, and was taken off the fire. Mrs. Peerybingle then went running to the door, where, what with the wheels of a cart, the tramp of a horse, the voice of a man, the tearing in and

out of an excited dog, and the surprising and mysterious appearance of a Baby, there was soon the very What 's-his-name to pay.

Where the Baby came from, or how Mrs. Peerybingle got hold of it in that flash of time, *I* don't know. But a live Baby there was, in Mrs. Peerybingle's arms; and a pretty tolerable amount of pride she seemed to have in it, when she was drawn gently to the fire by a sturdy figure of a man, much taller and much older than herself, who had to stoop a long way down to kiss her. But she was worth the trouble. Six foot six, with the lumbago, might have done it.

"Oh, goodness, John!" said Mrs. P. "What a state you 're in with the weather!"

He was something the worse for it, undeniably. The thick mist hung in clots upon his eyelashes like candied thaw, and between the fog and fire together, there were rainbows in his very whiskers.

"Why, you see, Dot," John made answer, slowly, as he unrolled a shawl from about his throat and warmed his hands, "it — it an't exactly summer weather. So, no wonder."

"I wish you would n't call me Dot, John. I don't like it," said Mrs. Peerybingle, pouting in a way that clearly showed she *did* like it, very much.

"Why, what else are you?" returned John, looking down upon her with a smile and giving her waist as light a squeeze as his huge hand and arm could give. "A dot and"—here he glanced at the Baby—"a dot and carry—I won't say it, for fear I should spoil it; but I was very near a joke. I don't know as ever I was nearer."

He was often near to something or other very clever, by his own account: this lumbering, slow, honest John; this John so heavy, but so light of spirit; so rough upon the surface, but so gentle at the core; so dull without, so quick

within; so stolid, but so good! Oh, Mother Nature, give thy children the true Poetry of Heart that hid itself in this poor Carrier's breast — he was but a Carrier, by the way—and we can bear to have them talking Prose, and leading lives of Prose; and bear to bless Thee for their company!

It was pleasant to see Dot, with her little figure and her Baby in her arms,—a very doll of a Baby,—glancing with a coquettish thoughtfulness at the fire, and inclining her delicate little head just enough to one side to let it rest in an odd, half-natural, half-affected, wholly nestling and agreeable manner, on the great rugged figure of the Carrier. It was pleasant to see him, with his tender awkwardness, endeavouring to adapt his rude support to her slight need, and make his burly middle-age a leaning-staff not inappropriate to her blooming youth. It was pleasant to observe how Tilly Slowboy, waiting in the background for

the Baby, took special cognisance (though in her earliest teens) of this grouping, and stood with her mouth and eyes wide open, and her head thrust forward, taking it in as if it were air. Nor was it less agreeable to observe how John the Carrier, reference being made by Dot to the aforesaid Baby, checked his hand when on the point of touching the infant as if he thought he might crack it; and bending down, surveyed it from a safe distance with a kind of puzzled pride, such as an amiable mastiff might be supposed to show if he found himself, one day, the father of a young canary.

"An't he beautiful, John? Don't he look precious in his sleep?"

"Very precious," said John. "Very much so. He generally *is* asleep, an't he?"

"Lor, John! Good gracious, no!"

"Oh," said John, pondering. "I thought his eyes was generally shut. Halloa!"

"Goodness, John, how you startle one!"

"It an't right for him to turn 'em up in that way!" said the astonished Carrier, "is it? See how he 's winking with both of 'em at once! And look at his mouth! why he 's gasping like a gold and silver fish!"

"You don't deserve to be a father, you don't," said Dot, with all the dignity of an experienced matron. "But how should you know what little complaints children are troubled with, John! You would n't so much as know their names, you stupid fellow." And when she had turned the Baby over on her left arm, and had slapped his back as a restorative, she pinched her husband's ear, laughing.

"No," said John, pulling off his outer coat. "It 's very true, Dot. I don't know much about it. I only know that I 've been fighting pretty stiffly with the Wind to-night. It 's been blowing

northeast, straight into the cart, the whole way home."

"Poor old man, so it has!" cried Mrs. Peerybingle, instantly becoming very active. "Here! Take the precious darling, Tilly, while I make myself of some use. Bless it, I could smother it with kissing it, I could! Hie then, good dog! Hie, Boxer, boy! Only let me make the tea first, John: and then I 'll help you with the parcels, like a busy bee. 'How doth the little'—and all the rest of it, you know, John. Did you ever learn 'How doth the little,' when you went to school, John?"

"Not to quite know it," John returned. "I was very near it once. But I should only have spoilt it, I dare say."

"Ha ha!" laughed Dot. She had the blithest little laugh you ever heard. "What a dear old darling of a dunce you are, John, to be sure!"

Not at all disputing this position, John went out to see that the boy with the

lantern, which had been dancing to and fro before the door and window, like a Will-of-the-Wisp, took due care of the horse; who was fatter than you would quite believe, if I gave you his measure, and so old that his birthday was lost in the mist of antiquity. Boxer, feeling that his attentions were due to the family in general, and must be impartially distributed, dashed in and out with bewildering inconstancy—now describing a circle of short barks round the horse, where he was being rubbed down at the stable-door; now feigning to make savage rushes at his mistress, and facetiously bringing himself to sudden stops; now eliciting a shriek from Tilly Slowboy, in the low nursing-chair near the fire, by the unexpected application of his moist nose to her countenance; now exhibiting an obtrusive interest in the Baby; now going round and round upon the hearth, and lying down as if he had established himself for the night; now getting up

again, and taking that nothing of a fag-end of a tail of his out into the weather, as if he had just remembered an appointment, and was off at a round trot to keep it.

"There! There 's the teapot, ready on the hob!" said Dot, as briskly busy as a child at play at keeping house. "And there 's the cold knuckle of ham; and there 's the butter; and there 's the crusty loaf, and all! Here 's the clothes-basket for the small parcels, John, if you 've got any there—where are you, John? Don't let the dear child fall under the grate, Tilly, whatever you do!"

It may be noted of Miss Slowboy, in spite of her rejecting the caution with some vivacity, that she had a rare and surprising talent for getting this Baby into difficulties, and had several times imperilled its short life in a quiet way peculiarly her own. She was of a spare and straight shape, this young lady,

"As briskly busy as a child at play at keeping house."

insomuch that her garments appeared to be in constant danger of sliding off those sharp pegs, her shoulders, on which they were loosely hung. Her costume was remarkable for the partial development, on all possible occasions, of some flannel vestment of a singular structure; also for affording glimpses, in the region of the back, of a corset or pair of stays in colour a dead green. Being always in a state of gaping admiration at everything, and absorbed, besides, in the perpetual contemplation of her mistress's perfections and the Baby's, Miss Slowboy, in her little errors of judgment, may be said to have done equal honour to her head and to her heart; and though these did less honour to the Baby's head, which they were the occasional means of bringing into contact with deal doors, dressers, stair-rails, bedposts, and other foreign substances, still they were the honest results of Tilly Slowboy's constant astonishment at finding herself so kindly

treated, and installed in such a comfortable home. For the maternal and paternal Slowbow were alike unknown to Fame, and Tilly had been bred by public charity, a Foundling; which word, though only differing from Fondling by one vowel's length, is very different in meaning and expresses quite another thing.

To have seen little Mrs. Peerybingle come back with her husband, tugging at the clothes-basket, and making the most strenuous exertions to do nothing at all (for he carried it), would have amused you almost as much as it amused him. It may have entertained the Cricket, too, for anything I know; but, certainly, it now began to chirp again, vehemently.

"Heyday!" said John, in his slow way. "It 's merrier than ever, to-night, I think."

"And it 's sure to bring us good fortune, John! It always has done so. To

have a Cricket on the Hearth is the luckiest thing in all the world!"

John looked at her as if he had very nearly got the thought into his head that she was his Cricket-in-chief, and he quite agreed with her. But it was probably one of his narrow escapes, for he said nothing.

"The first time I heard its cheerful little note, John, was on that night when you brought me home — when you brought me to my new home here, its little mistress. Nearly a year ago. You recollect, John?"

Oh, yes. John remembered. I should think so!

"Its chirp was such a welcome to me! It seemed so full of promise and encouragement. It seemed to say you would be kind and gentle with me, and would not expect (I had a fear of that, John, then) to find an old head on the shoulders of your foolish little wife."

John thoughtfully patted one of the

shoulders, and then the head, as though he would have said: No, no; he had had no such expectation; he had been quite content to take them as they were. And really he had reason. They were very comely.

"It spoke the truth, John, when it seemed to say so; for you have ever been, I am sure, the best, the most considerate, the most affectionate of husbands to me. This has been a happy home, John, and I love the Cricket for its sake!"

"Why, so do I then," said the Carrier. "So do I, Dot."

"I love it for the many times I have heard it, and the many thoughts its harmless music has given me. Sometimes, in the twilight, when I felt a little solitary and down-hearted, John,—before Baby was here to keep me company and make the house gay,—when I have thought how lonely you would be if I should die; how lonely I should be if I

could know that you had lost me, dear,—its Chirp, Chirp, Chirp upon the hearth, has seemed to tell me of another little voice, so sweet, so very dear to me, before whose coming sound my trouble vanished like a dream. And when I used to fear—I did fear once, John—I was very young, you know—that ours might prove to be an ill-assorted marriage—I being such a child, and you more like my guardian than my husband—and that you might not, however hard you tried, be able to learn to love me, as you hoped and prayed you might, its Chirp, Chirp, Chirp has cheered me up again, and filled me with new trust and confidence. I was thinking of these things to-night, dear, when I sat expecting you; and I love the Cricket for their sake!"

"And so do I," repeated John. "But, Dot! *I* hope and pray that I might learn to love you? How you talk! I had learnt that long before I brought you here, to be the Cricket's little mistress, Dot!"

She laid her hand an instant on his arm, and looked up at him with an agitated face, as if she would have told him something. Next moment she was down upon her knees before the basket, speaking in a sprightly voice, and busy with the parcels.

"There are not many of them to-night, John, but I saw some goods behind the cart, just now; and though they give more trouble, perhaps, still they pay as well; and so we have no reason to grumble, have we? Besides, you have been delivering, I dare say, as you came along?"

"Oh, yes," John said. "A good many."

"Why, what's this round box? Heart alive, John, it 's a wedding-cake!"

"Leave a woman alone to find out that," said John, admiringly. "Now a man would never have thought of it! Whereas, it 's my belief that if you was to pack a wedding-cake up in a tea-chest,

or a turn-up bedstead, or a pickled salmon keg, or any unlikely thing, a woman would be sure to find it out directly. Yes; I called for it at the pastry-cook's."

"And it weighs I don't know what — whole hundredweights!" cried Dot, making a great demonstration of trying to lift it. "Whose is it, John? Where is it going?"

"Read the writing on the other side," said John.

"Why, John! My Goodness, John!"

"Ah! who 'd have thought it!" John returned.

"You never mean to say," pursued Dot, sitting on the floor and shaking her head at him, "that it 's Gruff and Tackleton the toymaker!"

John nodded. Mrs. Peerybingle nodded also, fifty times at least. Not in assent —in dumb and pitying amazment; screwing up her lips the while with all their little force (they were never made for

"Heart alive, John, it's a wedding-cake!"

screwing up; I am clear of that), and looking the good Carrrier through and through, in her abstraction. Miss Slowboy, in the meantime, who had a mechanical power of reproducing scraps of current conversation for the delectation of the Baby, with all the sense struck out of them and all the nouns changed into the plural number, inquired aloud of that young creature, Was it Gruffs and Tackletons the toymakers then, and Would it call at Pastry-cooks for wedding-cakes, and Did its mothers know the boxes when its fathers brought them homes? and so on.

"And that is really to come about!" said Dot. "Why, she and I were girls at school together, John."

He might have been thinking of her, or nearly thinking of her, perhaps, as she was in that same school time. He looked upon her with a thoughtful pleasure, but he made no answer.

"And he's as old! As unlike her!—

Why, how many years older than you is Gruff and Tackleton, John?"

"How many more cups of tea shall I drink to-night at one sitting than Gruff and Tackleton ever took in four, I wonder!" replied John, good-humouredly, as he drew a chair to the round table, and began at the cold ham. "As to eating, I eat but little; but that little I enjoy, Dot."

Even this, his usual sentiment at meal times, one of his innocent delusions (for his appetite was always obstinate, and flatly contradicted him), awoke no smile in the face of his little wife who stood among the parcels, pushing the cake-box slowly from her with her foot, and never once looked, though her eyes were cast down, too, upon the dainty shoes she generally was so mindful of. Absorbed in thought, she stood there heedless alike of the tea and John (although he called to her, and rapped the table with his knife to startle her) until he rose

and touched her on the arm ; when she looked at him for a moment and hurried to her place behind the tea-board, laughing at her negligence. But not as she had laughed before. The manner and the music were quite changed.

The Cricket, too, had stopped. Somehow the room was not so cheerful as it had been. Nothing like it.

"So these are all the parcels, are they, John?" she said, breaking a long silence, which the honest Carrier had devoted to the practical illustration of one part of his favourite sentiment—certainly enjoying what he ate, if it could n't be admitted that he ate but little. "So these are all the parcels, are they, John?"

"That 's all," said John. "Why—no—I—" laying down his knife and fork, *and* taking a long breath. "I declare—I 've clean forgotten the old gentleman!"

"The old gentleman!"

"In the cart," said John. "He was *asleep*, among the straw, the last time I

saw him. I 've very nearly remembered him, twice, since I came in ; but he went out of my head again. Holloa! Yahip there! Rouse up! That 's my hearty!"

John said these latter words outside the door, whither he had hurried with the candle in his hand.

Miss Slowboy, conscious of some mysterious reference to The Old Gentleman, and connecting in her mystified imagination certain associations of a religious nature with the phrase, was so disturbed that, hastily rising from the low chair by the fire to seek protection near the skirts of her mistress, and coming into contact as she crossed the doorway with an ancient Stranger, she instinctively made a charge or butt at him with the only offensive instrument within her reach. This instrument happening to be the Baby, great commotion and alarm ensued, which the sagacity of Boxer rather tended to increase ; for that good dog, more thoughtful than its master, had, it seemed, been

watching the old gentleman in his sleep lest he should walk off with a few young poplar trees that were tied up behind the cart, and he still attended on him very closely, worrying his gaiters in fact, and making dead sets at the buttons.

"You 're such an undeniable good sleeper, Sir," said John, when tranquillity was restored—in the meantime the old gentleman had stood, bareheaded and motionless, in the centre of the room—"that I have half a mind to ask you where the other six are—only that would be a joke, and I know I should spoil it. Very near, though," murmured the Carrier, with a chuckle; "very near!"

The Stranger, who had long white hair, good features, singularly bold and well defined for an old man, and dark, bright, penetrating eyes, looked round with a smile, and saluted the Carrier's wife by gravely inclining his head.

His garb was very quaint and odd—a long, long way behind the time. Its hue

was brown, all over. In his hand he held a great brown club or walking-stick, and striking this upon the floor it fell asunder, and became a chair. On which he sat down, quite composedly.

"That's the way I found him, sitting by the roadside! Upright as a milestone."

"There!" said the Carrier, turning to his wife. "That's the way I found him, sitting by the roadside! Upright as a milestone. And almost as deaf."

"Sitting in the open air, John!"

"In the open air," replied the Carrier,

"just at dusk. 'Carriage Paid,' he said; and gave me eighteen pence. Then he got in. And there he is."

"He 's going, John, I think!"

Not at all. He was only going to speak.

"If you please, I was to be left till called for," said the Stranger, mildly. "Don't mind me."

With that, he took a pair of spectacles from one of his large pockets, and a book from another, and leisurely began to read. Making no more of Boxer than if he had been a house lamb!

The Carrier and his wife exchanged a look of perplexity. The stranger raised his head and, glancing from the latter to the former, said:

"Your daughter, my good friend?"

"Wife," returned John.

"Niece?" said the Stranger.

"Wife," roared John.

"Indeed?" observed the Stranger. "Surely? Very young!"

He quietly turned over, and resumed

his reading. But, before he could have read two lines, he again interrupted himself to say :

"Baby yours?"

John gave him a gigantic nod; equivalent to an answer in the affirmative, delivered through a speaking-trumpet.

"Girl?"

"Bo-o-oy!" roared John.

"Also very young, eh?"

Mrs. Peerybingle instantly struck in. "Two months and three da-ays! Vaccinated just six weeks ago-o! Took very fine-ly! Considered, by the doctor, a remarkably beautiful chi-ild! Equal to the general run of children at five months o-old! Takes notice, in a way quite won-der-ful! May seem impossible to you, but feels his legs al-ready!"

Here the breathless little mother, who had been shrieking these short sentences into the old man's ear until her pretty face was crimsoned, held up the Baby before him as a stubborn and triumph-

ant fact; while Tilly Slowboy, with a melodious cry of "Ketcher, Ketcher"—which sounded like some unknown words adapted to a popular Sneeze—performed some cow-like gambols round that all-unconscious Innocent.

"Hark! He 's called for, sure enough," said John. "There 's somebody at the door. Open it, Tilly."

Before she could reach it, however, it was opened from without, being a primitive sort of door, with a latch that any one could lift if he chose—and a good many people did choose, I can tell you; for all kinds of neighbours liked to have a cheerful word or two with the Carrier, though he was no great talker himself. Being opened, it gave admission to a little, meagre, thoughtful, dingy-faced man, who seemed to have made himself a great-coat from the sack-cloth covering of some old box; for when he turned to shut the door and keep the weather out he disclosed upon the back of that

garment the inscription G & T in large black capitals. Also the word GLASS in bold characters.

"Good evening, John!" said the little man. "Good evening, Mum. Good evening, Tilly. Good evening, Unbeknown! How's Baby, Mum? Boxer's pretty well, I hope?"

"All thriving, Caleb," replied Dot. "I am sure you need only look at the dear child, for one, to know that."

"And I 'm sure I need only look at you for another," said Caleb.

He did n't look at her, though; he had a wandering and thoughtful eye which seemed to be always projecting itself into some other time and place, no matter what he said—a description which will equally apply to his voice.

"Or at John for another," said Caleb. "Or at Tilly, as far as that goes. Or certainly at Boxer."

"Busy just now, Caleb?" asked the Carrier.

"Why, pretty well, John," he returned, with the distraught air of a man who was casting about for the Philosopher's stone, at least. "Pretty much so. There 's rather a run on Noah's Arks at present. I could have wished to improve upon the Family, but I don't see how it 's to be done at the price. It would be a satisfaction to one's mind to make it clearer which was Shems and Hams, and which was Wives. Flies an't on that scale, neither, as compared with elephants you know! Ah! well! Have you got anything in the parcel line for me, John?"

The Carrier put his hand into a pocket of the coat he had taken off; and brought out, carefully preserved in moss and paper, a tiny flower-pot.

"There it is!" he said, adjusting it with great care. "Not so much as a leaf damaged. Full of buds!"

Caleb's dull eye brightened, as he took it, and thanked him.

"Dear, Caleb," said the Carrier. "Very dear at this season."

"Never mind that. It would be cheap to me, whatever it cost," returned the little man. "Anything else, John?"

"A small box," replied the Carrier. "Here you are!"

"'For Caleb Plummer,'" said the little man, spelling out the direction. "'With Cash.' With Cash, John. I don't think it's for me."

"With Care," returned the Carrier, looking over his shoulder. "Where do you make out cash?"

"Oh! To be sure!" said Caleb. "It's all right. With care! Yes, yes; that's mine. It might have been with cash, indeed, if my dear Boy in the Golden South Americas had lived, John. You loved him like a son; did n't you? You need n't say you did. *I* know, of course. 'Caleb Plummer. With care.' Yes, yes, it's all right. It's a box of dolls' eyes for my daughter's work. I

wish it was her own sight in a box, John."

"'For Caleb Plummer,'" said the little man, spelling out the direction. "'With Cash.'"

"I wish it was, or could be!" cried the Carrier.

"Thank'ee," said the little man. "You speak very hearty. To think that she should never see the Dolls—and them a-staring at her, so bold, all day long! That's where it cuts. What 's the damage, John?"

"I'll damage you," said John, "if you inquire. Dot! Very near?"

"Well! it's like you to say so," observed the little man. "It's your kind way. Let me see. I think that's all."

"I think not," said the Carrier. "Try again."

"Something for our Governor, eh?" said Caleb, after pondering a little while. "To be sure. That's what I came for; but my head 's so running on them Arks and things! He has n't been here, has he?"

"Not he," returned the Carrier. "He 's too busy, courting."

"He 's coming round, though," said Caleb; "for he told me to keep on the near side of the road going home, and it

was ten to one he'd take me up. I had better go, by the bye.— You could n't have the goodness to let me pinch Boxer's tail, Mum, for half a moment, could you?"

"Why, Caleb! what a question!"

"Oh, never mind, Mum," said the little man. "He might n't like it, perhaps. There's a small order just come in for barking dogs; and I should wish to go as close to Natur' as I could, for sixpence. That's all. Never mind, Mum."

It happened opportunely that Boxer, without receiving the proposed stimulus, began to bark with great zeal. But as this implied the approach of some new visitor, Caleb, postponing his study from the life to a more convenient season, shouldered the round box and took a hurried leave. He might have spared himself the trouble, for he met the visitor upon the threshold.

"Oh! You are here, are you? Wait

a bit. I 'll take you home. John Peerybingle, my service to you. More of my service to your pretty wife. Handsomer every day! Better too, if possible! And younger," mused the speaker, in a low voice; "that 's the Devil of it!"

"I should be astonished at your paying compliments, Mr. Tackleton," said Dot, not with the best grace in the world, "but for your condition."

"You know all about it, then?"

"I have got myself to believe it, somehow," said Dot.

"After a hard struggle, I suppose?"

"Very."

Tackleton, the Toy-merchant, pretty generally known as Gruff and Tackleton —for that was the firm, though Gruff had been bought out long ago, only leaving his name, and as some said his nature, according to its Dictionary meaning, in the business — Tackleton, the Toy-merchant, was a man whose vocation had been quite misunderstood by his Parents

and Guardians. If they had made him a Money Lender, or a sharp Attorney, or a Sheriff's Officer, or a Broker, he might have sown his discontented oats in his youth, and, after having had the full run of himself in ill-natured transactions, might have turned out amiable, at last, for the sake of a little freshness and novelty. But, cramped and chafing in the peaceable pursuit of toy-making, he was a domestic Ogre, who had been living on children all his life, and was their implacable enemy. He despised all toys; would n't have bought one for the world; delighted, in his malice, to insinuate grim expressions into the faces of brown-paper farmers who drove pigs to market, bellmen who advertised lost lawyer's consciences, movable old ladies who darned stockings or carved pies; and other like samples of his stock in trade. In appalling masks, hideous, hairy, red-eyed Jacks in Boxes, Vampire Kites, demoniacal Tumblers who would n't lie down,

and were perpetually flying forward to stare infants out of countenance, his soul perfectly revelled. They were his only relief and safety-valve. He was great in such inventions. Anything suggestive of a Pony-nightmare, was delicious to him. He had even lost money (and he took to that toy very kindly) by getting up Goblin slides for magic-lanterns, whereon the Powers of Darkness were depicted as a sort of supernatural shell-fish, with human faces. In intensifying the portraiture of Giants, he had sunk quite a little capital: and though no painter himself, he could indicate, for the instruction of his artists, with a piece of chalk a certain furtive leer for the countenances of those monsters which was safe to destroy the peace of mind of any young gentleman between the ages of six and eleven, for the whole Christmas or Midsummer vacation.

What he was in toys, he was (as most men are) in all other things. You may

He did n't look much like a bridegroom, . . . But, a Bridegroom he designed to be"

easily suppose, therefore, that within the green cape which reached down to the calves of his legs there was buttoned up to the chin an uncommonly pleasant fellow; and that he was about as choice a spirit, and as agreeable a companion, as ever stood in a pair of bull-headed looking boots with mahogany-coloured tops. Still, Tackleton, the Toy-merchant, was going to be married. In spite of all this, he was going to be married. And to a young wife too—a beautiful young wife.

He didn't look much like a bridegroom, as he stood in the Carrier's kitchen with a twist in his dry face and a screw in his body, and his hat jerked over the bridge of his nose, and his hands tucked down into the bottoms of his pockets, and his whole sarcastic ill-conditioned self peering out of one little corner of one little eye, like the concentrated essence of any number of ravens. But a Bridegroom he designed to be.

"In three days' time. Next Thurs-

day. The last day of the first month in the year. That 's my wedding-day," said Tackleton.

Did I mention that he had always one eye wide open, and one eye nearly shut, and that the one eye nearly shut was always the expressive eye? I don't think I did.

"That 's my wedding-day!" said Tackleton, rattling his money.

"Why, it 's our wedding-day, too," exclaimed the Carrier.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Tackleton. "Odd! You 're just such another couple. Just!"

The indignation of Dot at this presumptuous assertion is not to be described. What next? His imagination would compass the possibility of just such another Baby, perhaps. The man was mad.

"I say! A word with you," murmured Tackleton, nudging the Carrier with his elbow and taking him a little

apart. "You 'll come to the wedding? We're in the same boat, you know."

"How in the same boat?" inquired the Carrier.

"A little disparity, you know," said Tackleton, with another nudge. "Come and spend an evening with us, beforehand."

"Why?" demanded John, astonished at this pressing hospitality.

"Why?" returned the other. "That 's a new way of receiving an invitation. Why, for pleasure — sociability, you know, and all that!"

"I thought you were never sociable," said John, in his plain way.

"Tchah! It 's of no use to be anything but free with you, I see," said Tackleton. "Why, then, the truth is you have a—what tea-drinking people call a sort of a comfortable appearance together—you and your wife. We know better, you know, but——"

"No, we don't know better," interposed John. "What are you talking about?"

"Well! We *don't* know better, then," said Tackleton. "We 'll agree that we don't. As you like; what does it matter? I was going to say, as you have that sort of appearance, your company will produce a favourable effect on Mrs. Tackleton that will be. And, though I don't think your good lady 's very friendly to me, in this matter, still she can't help herself from falling into my views, for there 's a compactness and cosiness of appearance about her that always tells, even in an indifferent case. You 'll say you 'll come?"

"We have arranged to keep our Wedding-Day (as far as that goes) at home," said John. "We have made the promise to ourselves these six months. We think, you see, that home——"

"Bah! what 's home?" cried Tackleton. "Four walls and a ceiling! (why

don't you kill that Cricket? *I* would! I always do. I hate their noise.) There are four walls and a ceiling at my house. Come to me!"

"You kill your Crickets, eh?" said John.

"Scrunch 'em, Sir," returned the other, setting his heel heavily on the floor. "You 'll say you 'll come? It's as much your interest as mine, you know, that the women should persuade each other that they 're quiet and contented, and could n't be better off. I know their way. Whatever one woman says, another woman is determined to clinch, always. There 's that spirit of emulation among 'em, Sir, that if your wife says to my wife, 'I 'm the happiest woman in the world, and mine is the best husband in the world, and I dote on him,' my wife will say the same to yours, or more, and half believe it."

"Do you mean to say she don't then?" asked the Carrier.

"Don't!" cried Tackleton, with a short, sharp laugh. "Don't what?"

The Carrier had had some faint idea of adding, "dote upon you." But happening to meet the half-closed eye, as it twinkled upon him over the turned-up collar of the cape, which was within an ace of poking it out, he felt it such an unlikely part and parcel of anything to be doted on, that he substituted, "that she don't believe it?"

"Ah, you dog! You 're joking," said Tackleton.

But the Carrier, though slow to understand the full drift of his meaning, eyed him in such a serious manner that he was obliged to be a little more explanatory.

"I have the humour," said Tackleton; holding up the fingers of his left hand, and tapping the forefinger, to imply "there I am, Tackleton to wit"; "I have the humour, Sir, to marry a young wife and a pretty wife"; here he rapped

his little finger, to express the Bride—not sparingly, but sharply, with a sense of power. "I 'm able to gratify that humour and I do. It 's my whim. But—now look there."

He pointed to where Dot was sitting, thoughtfully, before the fire, leaning her dimpled chin upon her hand, and watching the bright blaze. The Carrier looked at her, and then at him, and then at her, and then at him again.

"She honours and obeys, no doubt, you know," said Tackleton, "and that, as I am not a man of sentiment, is quite enough for *me*. But do you think there 's anything more in it?"

"I think," observed the Carrier, "that I should chuck any man out of window who said there was n't."

"Exactly so," returned the other, with an unusual alacrity of assent. "To be sure! Doubtless you would. Of course. I 'm certain of it. Good night. Pleasant dreams!"

The good Carrier was puzzled, and made uncomfortable and uncertain, in spite of himself. He could 'nt help showing it in his manner.

"Good night, my dear friend!" said Tackleton, compassionately. "I 'm off. We 're exactly alike, in reality, I see. You won't give us to-morrow evening? Well! Next day you go out visiting, I know. I 'll meet you there, and bring my wife that is to be. It 'll do her good. You 're agreeable? Thank 'ee. What's that!"

It was a loud cry from the Carrier's wife — a loud, sharp, sudden cry, that made the room ring, like a glass vessel. She had risen from her seat, and stood like one transfixed by terror and surprise. The Stranger had advanced towards the fire to warm himself, and stood within a short stride of her chair. But quite still.

"Dot!" cried the Carrier. "Mary! Darling! What 's the matter?"

They were all about her in a moment.

Caleb, who had been dozing on the cake-box, in the first imperfect recovery of his suspended presence of mind, seized Miss Slowboy by the hair of her head, but immediately apologised.

"Mary!" exclaimed the Carrier, supporting her in his arms. "Are you ill? What is it? Tell me, dear!"

She only answered by beating her hands together, and falling into a wild fit of laughter. Then, sinking from his grasp upon the ground, she covered her face with her apron and wept bitterly. And then she laughed again, and then she cried again; and then she said how cold it was, and suffered him to lead her to the fire, where she sat down as before. The old man standing, as before—quite still.

"I 'm better, John," she said. "I 'm quite well now—I——"

"John!" But John was on the other side of her. Why turn her face towards the strange old gentleman, as if addressing him! Was her brain wandering?

"Only a fancy, John dear — a kind of shock — a something coming suddenly before my eyes — I don't know what it was. It's quite gone; quite gone."

"I'm glad it's gone," muttered Tackleton, turning the expressive eye all round the room. "I wonder where it's gone, and what it was. Humph! Caleb, come here! Who's that with the grey hair?"

"I don't know, Sir," returned Caleb in a whisper. "Never see him before, in all my life. A beautiful figure for a nutcracker; quite a new model. With a screw-jaw opening down into his waistcoat, he'd be lovely."

"Not ugly enough," said Tackleton.

"Or for a firebox, either," observed Caleb, in deep contemplation, "what a model! Unscrew his head to put the matches in, turn him heels up'ards for the light, and what a firebox for a gentleman's mantel-shelf, just as he stands!"

"Not half ugly enough," said Tackleton. "Nothing in him at all. Come! Bring that box! All right now, I hope?"

"Oh, quite gone! Quite gone!" said the little woman, waving him hurriedly away. "Good night," said Tackleton. "Good night, John Peerybingle. Take care how you carry that box, Caleb! Let it fall, and I'll murder you! Dark as pitch, and weather worse than ever, eh? Good night!"

So, with another sharp look round the room, he went out at the door, followed by Caleb with the wedding-cake on his head.

The Carrier had been so much astounded by his little wife, and so busily engaged in soothing and tending her, that he had scarcely been conscious of the Stranger's presence until now, when he again stood there, their only guest.

"He don't belong to them, you see," said John. "I must give him a hint to go."

"I beg your pardon, friend," said the old gentleman, advancing to him; "the more so, as I fear your wife has not been well; but the Attendant whom my infirmity," he touched his ears and shook his head, "renders almost indispensable not having arrived, I fear there must be some mistake. The bad night which made the shelter of your comfortable cart (may I never have a worse!) so acceptable, is still as bad as ever. Would you, in your kindness, suffer me to rent a bed here?"

"Yes, yes," cried Dot. "Yes! Certainly!"

"Oh!" said the Carrier, surprised by the rapidity of this consent. "Well! I don't object; but still I 'm not quite sure that——"

"Hush!" she interrupted. "Dear John!"

"Why, he 's stone deaf," urged John.

"I know he is, but—Yes Sir, certainly. Yes! certainly! I 'll make him up a bed, directly, John."

As she hurried off to do it, the flutter of her spirits and the agitation of her manner were so strange, that the Carrier stood looking after her, quite dumbfounded.

"Did its mothers make it up a Beds then!" cried Miss Slowboy to the Baby; "and did its hair grow brown and curly, when its caps was lifted off, and frighten it, a precious Pets, a-sitting by the fires!"

With that unaccountable attraction of the mind to trifles, which is often incidental to a state of doubt and confusion, the Carrier, as he walked slowly to and fro, found himself mentally repeating even these absurd words, many times. So many times that he got them by heart, and was still conning them over and over, like a lesson, when Tilly, after administering as much friction to the little bald head with her hand as she thought wholesome (according to the practice of nurses), had once more tied the Baby's cap on.

"And frighten it a precious Pets,

a-sitting by the fires. What frightened Dot, I wonder!" mused the Carrier, pacing to and fro.

He scouted, from his heart, the insinuations of the Toy-merchant, and yet they filled him with a vague, indefinite uneasiness,—for Tackleton was quick and sly,—and he had that painful sense, himself, of being a man of slow perception, that a broken hint was always worrying to him. He certainly had no intention in his mind of linking anything that Tackleton had said with the unusual conduct of his wife; but the two subjects of reflection came into his mind together, and he could not keep them asunder.

The bed was soon made ready, and the visitor, declining all refreshment but a cup of tea, retired. Then Dot — quite well again, she said, quite well again— arranged the great chair in the chimney-corner for her husband; filled his pipe and gave it him; and took her usual little stool beside him on the hearth.

"She always would sit on that little stool."

She always *would* sit on that little stool; I think she must have had a kind of notion that it was a coaxing, wheedling, little stool.

She was, out and out, the very best filler of a pipe, I should say, in the four quarters of the globe. To see her put that chubby little finger in the bowl and then blow down the pipe to clear the tube, and, when she had done so, affect to think that there was really something in the tube, and blow a dozen times, and hold it to her eye like a telescope, with a most provoking twist in her capital little face as she looked down it, was quite a brilliant thing. As to the tobacco, she was perfect mistress of the subject; and her lighting of the pipe, with a wisp of paper, when the Carrier had it in his mouth —going so very near his nose, and yet

not scorching it—was Art—high Art, Sir.

"Hold it to her eye like a telescope, with a most provoking twist in her capital little face."

And the Cricket and the Kettle, tuning up again, acknowledged it! The bright

fire, blazing up again, acknowledged it! The little Mower on the clock, in his unheeded work, acknowledged it! The Carrier, in his smoothing forehead and expanding face, acknowledged it—the readiest of all.

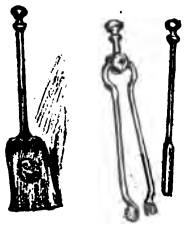
And as he soberly and thoughtfully puffed at his old pipe, and as the Dutch clock ticked, and as the red fire gleamed, and as the Cricket chirped, that Genius of his Hearth and Home (for such the Cricket was) came out in fairy shape into the room, and summoned many forms of Home about him. Dots of all ages and all sizes filled the chamber. Dots who were merry children, running on before him, gathering flowers in the fields; coy Dots, half shrinking from, half yielding to, the pleading of his own rough image; newly-married Dots, alighting at the door, and taking wondering possession of the household keys; motherly little Dots, attended by fictitious Slowboys, bearing babies to be christ-

ened; matronly Dots, still young and blooming, watching Dots of daughters, as they danced at rustic balls; fat Dots, encircled and beset by troops of rosy grandchildren; withered Dots, who leaned on sticks, and tottered as they crept along. Old Carriers, too, appeared, with blind old Boxers lying at their feet; and newer carts with younger drivers ("Peerybingle Brothers" on the tilt); and sick old Carriers, tended by the gentlest hands; and graves of dead-and-gone old Carriers, green in the churchyard. And as the Cricket showed him all these things—he saw them plainly, though his eyes were fixed upon the fire—the Carrier's heart grew light and happy, and he thanked his Household Gods with all his might, and cared no more for Gruff and Tackleton than you do.

But what was that young figure of a man, which the same Fairy Cricket set

so near Her stool, and which remained there, singly and alone? Why did it linger still, so near her, with its arm upon the chimney-piece, ever repeating: "Married! and not to me!"

Oh, Dot! Oh, failing Dot! There is no place for it in all your husband's visions; why has its shadow fallen on his hearth?



CHIRP THE SECOND

CALEB PLUMMER and his Blind Daughter lived all alone by themselves, as the Story-books say—and my blessing, with yours to back it, I hope, on the Story-books, for saying anything in this workaday world!—Caleb Plummer and his Blind Daughter lived all alone by themselves, in a little cracked nutshell of a wooden house, which was, in truth, no better than a pimple on the prominent red-brick nose of Gruff and Tackleton. The premises of Gruff and Tackleton were the great feature of the street; but you might have knocked down Caleb Plummer's dwelling with a hammer or two, and carried off the pieces in a cart.

If anyone had done the dwelling-house of Caleb Plummer the honour to miss it after such an inroad, it would have been, no doubt, to commend its demolition as a vast improvement. It stuck to the premises of Gruff and Tackleton like a barnacle to a ship's keel, or a snail to a door, or a little bunch of toadstools to the stem of a tree. But it was the germ from which the full-grown trunk of Gruff and Tackleton had sprung, and under its crazy roof the Gruff before last had, in a small way, made toys for a generation of old boys and girls, who had played with them, and found them out, and broken them, and gone to sleep.

I have said that Caleb and his poor Blind Daughter lived here: I should have said that Caleb lived here, and his poor Daughter somewhere else; in an enchanted home of Caleb's furnishing, where scarcity and shabbiness were not, and trouble never entered. Caleb was no sorcerer, but in the only magic art

that still remains to us, the magic of devoted, deathless love, Nature had been the mistress of his study; and from her teaching all the wonder came.

The Blind Girl never knew that ceilings were discoloured; walls blotched and bare of plaster here and there; high crevices unstopped and widening every day; beams mouldering and tending downward. The Blind Girl never knew that iron was rusting, wood rotting, paper peeling off; the very size and shape and true proportion of the dwelling withering away. The Blind Girl never knew that ugly shapes of delf and earthenware were on the board; that sorrow and faintheartedness were in the house; that Caleb's scanty hairs were turning greyer and more grey before her sightless face. The Blind Girl never knew they had a master—cold, exacting, and uninterested; never knew that Tackleton was Tackleton, in short, but lived in the belief of an eccentric humour-

ist who loved to have his jest with them ; and who, while he was the Guardian Angel of their lives, disdained to hear one word of thankfulness.

And all was Caleb's doing ; all the doing of her simple father ! But he, too, had a Cricket on his Hearth; and, listening sadly to its music when the motherless Blind Child was very young, that Spirit had inspired him with the thought that even her great deprivation might be almost changed into a blessing, and the girl made happy by these little means. For all the Cricket Tribe are potent Spirits, even though the people who hold converse with them do not know it (which is frequently the case); and there are not in the Unseen World, Voices more gentle and more true, that may be so implicitly relied on, or that are so certain to give none but tenderest counsel, as the Voices in which the Spirits of the Fireside and the Hearth address themselves to human kind.

Caleb and his daughter were at work together in their usual working-room, which served them for their ordinary living-room as well, and a strange place it was. There were houses in it, finished and unfinished, for Dolls of all stations in life. Suburban tenements for Dolls of moderate means; kitchens and single apartments for Dolls of the lower classes; capital town residences for Dolls of high estate. Some of these establishments were already furnished according to estimate, with a view to the convenience of Dolls of limited income; others could be fitted on the most expensive scale at a moment's notice, from whole shelves of chairs and tables, sofas, bedsteads, and upholstery. The nobility and gentry and public in general, for whose accommodation these tenements were designed, lay here and there in baskets, staring straight up at the ceiling; but in denoting their degrees in society and confining them to their respective stations (which

experience shows to be lamentably difficult in real life), the makers of these Dolls had far improved on Nature, who is often froward and perverse; for they, not resting on such arbitrary marks as satin, cotton-print, and bits of rag, had superadded striking personal differences which allowed of no mistake. Thus, the Doll lady of Distinction had wax limbs of perfect symmetry,—but only she and her compeers—the next grade in the social scale being made of leather, and the next of coarse linen stuff. As to the common people, they had just so many matches out of tinder-boxes for their arms and legs, and there they were — established in their sphere at once, beyond the possibility of getting out of it.

There were various other samples of his handicraft, besides Dolls, in Caleb Plummer's room. There were Noah's Arks, in which the Birds and Beasts were an uncommonly tight fit, I assure you, though they could be crammed in,

anyhow, at the roof, and ratt
shaken into the smallest compass
bold poetical license, most of these
Arks had knockers on the doors
sistent appendages, perhaps, as su
of morning callers and a Postma
pleasant finish to the outside of th
ing. There were scores of mel
little carts which, when the whe
round, performed most doleful
many small fiddles, drums, and
struments of torture ; no end of
shields, swords, spears, and guns.
were little tumblers in red bree
cessantly swarming up high obs
red tape and coming down, head
the other side ; and there were i
able old gentlemen of respectabl
say venerable appearance, insanel
over horizontal pegs, inserted
purpose in their own street
There were beasts of all sorts ;
in particular, of every breed, f
spotted barrel on four pegs, with

tippet for a mane, to the thoroughbred rocker on his highest mettle. As it would have been hard to count the dozens upon dozens of grotesque figures that were ever ready to commit all sorts of absurdities on the turning of a handle, so it would have been no easy task to mention any human folly, vice, or weakness that had not its type, immediate or remote, in Caleb Plummer's room. And not in an exaggerated form, for very little handles will move men and women to as strange performances as any Toy was ever made to undertake.

In the midst of all these objects, Caleb and his daughter sat at work. The Blind Girl, busy as a Doll's dressmaker; Caleb painting and glazing the four-pair front of a desirable family mansion.

The care imprinted in the lines of Caleb's face, and his absorbed and dreamy manner, which would have sat well on some alchemist or abstruse

student, were at first sight an odd contrast to his occupation and the trivialities about him. But trivial things, invented and pursued for bread, become very serious matters of fact; and, apart from this consideration, I am not at all prepared to say, myself, that if Caleb had been a Lord Chamberlain, or a Member of Parliament, or a lawyer, or even a great speculator, he would have dealt in toys one whit less whimsical; while I have a very great doubt whether they would have been as harmless.

"So you were out in the rain last night, father, in your beautiful new great-coat," said Caleb's daughter.

"In my beautiful new great-coat," answered Caleb, glancing towards a clothes-line in the room, on which the sack-cloth garment, previously described, was carefully hung up to dry.

"How glad I am you bought it, father!"

"And of such a tailor, too," said

Caleb. "Quite a fashionable tailor. It's too good for me."

The Blind Girl rested from her work, and laughed with delight: "Too good, father! What can be too good for you?"

"I'm half ashamed to wear it, though," said Caleb, watching the effect of what he said upon her brightening face; "upon my word! When I hear the boys and people say behind me, 'Halloa! Here's a swell!' I don't know which way to look. And when the beggar would n't go away last night, and, when I said I was a very common man, said, 'No, your Honour! Bless your Honour, don't say that!' I was quite ashamed. I really felt as if I had n't a right to wear it."

Happy Blind Girl! How merry she was, in her exultation!

"I see you, father," she said, clasping her hands, "as plainly as if I had the eyes I never want when you are with me. A blue coat——"

"Bright blue," said Caleb.

"Yes, yes! Bright blue!" exclaimed the girl, turning up her radiant face; "the colour I can just remember in the blessed sky! You told me it was blue before! A bright blue coat——"

"Made loose to the figure," suggested Caleb.

"Yes! Loose to the figure!" cried the Blind Girl, laughing heartily; "and in it you, dear father, with your merry eye, your smiling face, your free step, and your dark hair: looking so young and handsome!"

"Halloa! Halloa!" said Caleb. "I shall be vain presently."

"I think you are already," cried the Blind Girl, pointing at him in her glee. "I know you, father! Ha, ha, ha! I 've found you out, you see!"

How different the picture in her mind from Caleb, as he sat observing her! She had spoken of his free step. She was right in that. For years and years he

never once had crossed that threshold at his own slow pace, but with a footfall counterfeited for her ear; and never had he, when his heart was heaviest, forgotten the light tread that was to render her so cheerful and courageous!

Heaven knows! But I think Caleb's vague bewilderment of manner may have half originated in his having confused himself about himself and everything around him, for the love of his Blind Daughter. How could the little man be otherwise than bewildered after labouring for so many years to destroy his own identity, and that of all the objects that had any bearing on it!

"There we are," said Caleb, falling back a pace or two to form the better judgment of his work; "as near the real thing as six-penn'orth of halfpence is to sixpence. What a pity that the whole front of the house opens at once! If there was only a staircase in it, now, and regular doors to the rooms to go in at! But

that 's the worst of my calling; I 'm always deluding myself and swindling myself."

"You are speaking quite softly. You are not tired, father?"

"Tired," echoed Caleb, with a great burst of animation, "what should tire me, Bertha? *I* was never tired. What does it mean?"

To give the greater force to his words he checked himself in an involuntary imitation of two half-length stretching and yawning figures on the mantel-shelf, who were represented as in one eternal state of weariness from the waist upwards, and hummed a fragment of a song. It was a Bacchanalian song, something about a Sparkling Bowl; and he sang it with an assumption of a Devil-may-care voice that made his face a thousand times more meagre and more thoughtful than ever.

"What! You 're singing, are you?" said Tackleton, putting his head in at the door, "Go it! *I* can't sing."

Nobody would have suspected him of

"What! You're singing, are you?" said Tackleton. * * *
"Go it! I can't sing."

it. He had n't what is generally termed a singing face, by any means.

"I can't afford to sing," said T
ton. "I 'm glad you can. I ho
can afford to work, too. Hardly ti
both, I should think?"

"If you could only see him, I
how he 's winking at me!" whi
Caleb. "Such a man to joke
think, if you did n't know him, I
in earnest—would n't you, now?"

The Blind Girl smiled, and nod

"The bird that can sing and
sing must be made to sing, they
grumbled Tackleton. "What ab
owl that can't sing, and ought
sing, and will sing; is there an
that *he* should be made to do?"

"The extent to which he 's win
this moment!" whispered Caleb
daughter. "Oh, my gracious!"

"Always merry and light-heart
us!" cried the smiling Bertha.

"Oh, you 're there, are you
swered Tackleton. "Poor Idiot!
really did believe she was an Idio

he founded the belief, I can't say whether consciously or not, upon her being fond of him.

"Well! and being there,—how are you?" said Tackleton; in his grudging way.

"Oh! well; quite well. And as happy as even you can wish me to be. As happy as you would make the whole world, if you could!"

"Poor Idiot!" muttered Tackleton. "No gleam of reason. Not a gleam!"

The Blind Girl took his hand and kissed it; held it for a moment in her own two hands; and laid her cheek against it tenderly, before releasing it. There was such unspeakable affection and such fervent gratitude in the act that Tackleton himself was moved to say, in a milder growl than usual:

"What's the matter now?"

"I stood it close beside my pillow when I went to sleep last night, and remembered it in my dreams. And when

the day broke, and the glorious red sun —the *red* sun, father?"

"Red in the mornings and the evenings, Bertha," said poor Caleb, with a woeful glance at his employer.

"When it rose, and the bright light I almost fear to strike myself against in walking came into the room, I turned the little tree towards it, and blessed Heaven for making things so precious, and blessed you for sending them to cheer me!"

"Bedlam broke loose!" said Tackleton under his breath. "We shall arrive at the strait-waistcoat and mufflers soon. We're getting on!"

Caleb, with his hands hooked loosely in each other, stared vacantly before him while his daughter spoke, as if he really were uncertain (I believe he was) whether Tackleton had done anything to deserve her thanks or not. If he could have been a perfectly free agent at that moment, required, on pain of death, to kick

the Toy-merchant or fall at his feet, according to his merits, I believe it would have been an even chance which course he would have taken. Yet Caleb knew that with his own hands he had brought the little rose-tree home for her so carefully, and that with his own lips he had forged the innocent deception which should help to keep her from suspecting how much, how very much, he every day denied himself, that she might be the happier.

"Bertha!" said Tackleton, assuming, for the nonce, a little cordiality. "Come here."

"Oh! I can come straight to you! You need n't guide me!" she rejoined.

"Shall I tell you a secret, Bertha?"

"If you will!" she answered, eagerly.

How bright the darkened face! How adorned with light, the listening head!

"This is the day on which little what 's-her-name, the spoilt child, Peerybingle's wife, pays her regular visit to

you—makes her fantastic Pic-Nic here; an't it?" said Tackleton, with a strong expression of distaste for the whole concern.

"Yes," replied Bertha. "This is the day."

"I thought so!" said Tackleton. "I should like to join the party."

"Do you hear that, father!" cried the Blind Girl in an ecstasy.

"Yes, yes, I hear it," murmured Caleb, with the fixed look of a sleep-walker; "but I don't believe it. It's one of my lies, I've no doubt."

"You see, I—I want to bring the Peerybingles a little more into company with May Fielding," said Tackleton. "I am going to be married to May."

"Married!" cried the Blind Girl, starting from him.

"She's such a confounded Idiot," muttered Tackleton, "that I was afraid she'd never comprehend me. Ah, Bertha! Married! Church, parson, clerk,

beadle, glass-coach, bells, breakfast, bride-cake, favours, marrow-bones, cleavers, and all the rest of the tomfoolery. A wedding, you know; a wedding. Don't you know what a wedding is?"

"I know," replied the Blind Girl, in a gentle tone. "I understand!"

"Do you?" muttered Tackleton. "It's more than I expected. Well! On that account I want to join the party, and to bring May and her mother. I'll send in a little something or other before the afternoon. A cold leg of mutton, or some comfortable trifle of that sort. You'll expect me?"

"Yes," she answered.

She had dropped her head and turned away, and so stood, with her hands crossed, musing. "I don't think you will," muttered Tackleton, looking at her; "for you seem to have forgotten all about it already. Caleb!"

"I may venture to say I'm here, I suppose," thought Caleb. "Sir!"

"Take care she don't forget what I've been saying to her."

"*She* never forgets," returned Caleb. "It 's one of the few things she an't clever in."

"Every man thinks his own geese swans," observed the Toy-merchant, with a shrug. "Poor devil!"

Having delivered himself of which remark with infinite contempt, old Gruff and Tackleton withdrew.

Bertha remained where he had left her, lost in meditation. The gaiety had vanished from her downcast face and it was very sad. Three or four times she shook her head, as if bewailing some remembrance or some loss; but her sorrowful reflections found no vent in words.

It was not until Caleb had been occupied some time in yoking a team of horses to a waggon, by the summary process of nailing the harness to the vital parts of their bodies, that she drew near

to his working-stool and, sitting down beside him, said :

"Father, I am lonely in the dark. I want my eyes—my patient, willing eyes."

"Here they are," said Caleb. "Always ready. They are more yours than mine, Bertha, any hour in the four and twenty. What shall your eyes do for you, dear?"

"Look round the room, father."

"All right," said Caleb. "No sooner said than done, Bertha."

"Tell me about it."

"It's much the same as usual," said Caleb. "Homely, but very snug. The gay colours on the walls, the bright flowers on the plates and dishes, the shining wood, where there are beams or panels, the general cheerfulness and neatness of the building, make it very pretty."

Cheerful and neat it was, wherever Bertha's hands could busy themselves. But nowhere else was cheerfulness and

neatness possible, in the old crazy shed which Caleb's fancy so transformed.

"You have your working dress on, and are not so gallant as when you wear the handsome coat?" said Bertha, touching him.

"Not quite so gallant," answered Caleb. "Pretty brisk, though."

"Father," said the Blind Girl, drawing close to his side, and stealing one arm round his neck. "Tell me something about May. She is very fair?"

"She is, indeed," said Caleb. And she was indeed. It was quite a rare thing to Caleb not to have to draw on his invention.

"Her hair is dark," said Bertha, pensively, "darker than mine. Her voice is sweet and musical, I know. I have often loved to hear it. Her shape——"

"There 's not a Doll's in all the room to equal it," said Caleb. "And her eyes!"——

He stopped; for Bertha had drawn

closer round his neck ; and, from the arm that clung about him, came a warning pressure which he understood too well.

He coughed a moment, hammered for a moment, and then fell back upon the song about the Sparkling Bowl—his infallible resource in all such difficulties.

"Our friend, father, our benefactor. I am never tired you know of hearing about him.—Now was I, ever?" she said, hastily.

"Of course not," answered Caleb. "And with reason——."

"Ah! With how much reason!" cried the Blind Girl. With such fervency that Caleb, though his motives were so pure, could not endure to meet her face; but dropped his eyes, as if she could have read in them his innocent deceit.

"Then tell me again about him, dear father," said Bertha. "Many times again! His face is benevolent, kind, and tender. Honest and true, I am sure

it is. The manly heart, that tries to cloak all favours with a show of roughness and unwillingness, beats in its every look and glance."

"And makes it noble," added Caleb, in his quiet desperation.

"And makes it noble!" cried the Blind Girl. "He is older than May, father."

"Ye-es," said Caleb, reluctantly. "He 's a little older than May. But that don't signify."

"Oh, father, yes! To be his patient companion in infirmity and age; to be his gentle nurse in sickness, and his constant friend in suffering and sorrow; to know no weariness in working for his sake; to watch him, tend him: sit beside his bed and talk to him, awake; and pray for him, asleep; what privileges these would be! What opportunities for proving all her truth and her devotion to him! Would she do all this, dear father?"

"He was almost sorry to have brought that tearful happiness upon her."

"No doubt of it," said Caleb.

"I love her, father; I can love her from my soul!" exclaimed the Blind Girl. And saying so, she laid her poor blind face on Caleb's shoulder and so wept and wept that he was almost sorry to have brought that tearful happiness upon her.

In the meantime, there had been a pretty sharp commotion at John Peerybingle's; for little Mrs. Peerybingle naturally could n't think of going anywhere without the Baby, and to get the Baby under weigh took time. Not that there was much of the Baby, speaking of it as a thing of weight and measure, but there was a vast deal to do about and about it, and it all had to be done by easy stages. For instance: when the Baby was got, by hook and by crook, to a certain point of dressing, and you might have rationally supposed that another touch or two would finish him off and turn him out a tip-top Baby, challenging

the world, he was unexpectedly extinquished in a flannel cap and hustled off to bed, where he simmered (so to speak) between two blankets for the best part of an hour. From this state of inaction he was then recalled, shining very much and roaring violently, to partake of—well! I would rather say, if you'll permit me to speak generally—of a slight repast. After which he went to sleep again. Mrs. Peerybingle took advantage of this interval to make herself as smart in a small way as ever you saw anybody in all your life; and, during the same short truce, Miss Slowboy insinuated herself into a spencer of a fashion so surprising and ingenious that it had no connection with herself or anything else in the universe, but was a shrunken, dog's-eared, independent fact, pursuing its lonely course without the least regard to anybody. By this time the Baby, being all alive again, was invested, by the united efforts of Mrs. Peerybingle

and Miss Slowboy, with a cream-coloured mantle for its body, and a sort of nankeen raised-pie for its head; and so in course of time they all three got down to the door, where the old horse had already taken more than the full value of his day's toll out of the Turnpike Trust by tearing up the road with his impatient autographs, and whence Boxer might be dimly seen in the remote perspective, standing looking back, and tempting him to come on without orders.

As to a chair, or anything of that kind for helping Mrs. Peerybingle into the cart, you know very little of John, I flatter myself, if you think *that* was necessary. Before you could have seen him lift her from the ground, there she was in her place, fresh and rosy, saying, "John! How CAN you! Think of Tilly!"

If I might be allowed to mention a young lady's legs on any terms, I would observe of Miss Slowboy's that there was

a fatality about them which rendered them singularly liable to be grazed, and that she never effected the smallest ascent or descent without recording the circumstance upon them with a notch, as Robinson Crusoe marked the days upon his wooden calendar. But as this might be considered ungenteel, I 'll think of it.

"John? You 've got the basket with the Veal and Ham-Pie and things; and the bottles of Beer?" said Dot. "If you have n't, you must turn round again, this very minute."

"You 're a nice little article," returned the Carrier, "to be talking about turning round, after keeping me a full quarter of an hour behind my time."

"I am sorry for it, John," said Dot in a great bustle, "but I really could not think of going to Bertha's—I would not do it, John, on any account—without the Veal and Ham-Pie and things, and the bottles of Beer. Way!"

This monosyllable was addressed to the horse, who did n't mind it at all.

"Oh *do* way, John!" said Mrs. Peerybingle. "Please!"

"It 'll be time enough to do that," returned John, "when I begin to leave things behind me. The basket 's here, safe enough."

"What a hard-hearted monster you must be, John, not to have said so at once, and save me such a turn! I declare I would n't go to Bertha's without the Veal and Ham-Pie and things, and the bottles of Beer, for any money. Regularly once a fortnight ever since we were married, John, have we made our little Pic-Nic there. If anything was to go wrong with it, I should almost think we were never to be lucky again."

"It was a kind thought in the first instance," said the Carrier; "and I honour you for it, little woman."

"My dear John," replied Dot, turning

very red. "Don't talk about honouring *me*. Good Gracious!"

"By the bye—" observed the Carrier. "That old gentleman,——"

Again, so visibly and instantly embarrassed.

"He 's an odd fish," said the Carrier, looking straight along the road before them. "I can't make him out. I don't believe there 's any harm in him."

"None at all. I 'm—I 'm sure there 's none at all."

"Yes?" said the Carrier, with his eyes attracted to her face by the great earnestness of her manner. "I am glad you feel so certain of it, because it 's a confirmation to me. It 's curious that he should have taken it into his head to ask leave to go on lodging with us; an't it? Things come about so strangely."

"So very strangely," she rejoined, in a low voice, scarcely audible.

"However, he 's a good-natured old gentleman," said John, "and pays as a

gentleman, and I think his word is to be relied upon, like a gentleman's. I had quite a long talk with him this morning; he can hear me better already, he says, as he gets more used to my voice. He told me a great deal about himself, and I told him a good deal about myself, and a rare lot of questions he asked me. I gave him information about my having two beats, you know, in my business; one day to the right from our house and back again; another day to the left from our house and back again (for he 's a stranger and don't know the names of places about here); and he seemed quite pleased. 'Why, then, I shall be returning home to-night your way,' he says, 'when I thought you 'd be coming in an exactly opposite direction. That 's capital. I may trouble you for another lift, perhaps, but I 'll engage not to fall so sound asleep again.' He *was* sound asleep, sure-ly!—Dot! what are you thinking of?"

"Thinking of, John? I—I was listening to you."

"Oh! That 's all right!" said the honest Carrier. "I was afraid, from the look of your face, that I had gone rambling on so long as to set you thinking about something else. I was very near it, I 'll be bound."

Dot making no reply, they jogged on for some little time in silence. But it was not easy to remain silent very long in John Peerybingle's cart, for everybody on the road had something to say; though it might only be "How are you!" and indeed it was very often nothing else, still, to give that back again in the right spirit of cordiality, required, not merely a nod and a smile, but as wholesome an action of the lungs, withal, as a long-winded Parliamentary speech. Sometimes passengers on foot or horseback plodded on a little way beside the cart, for the express purpose of having a chat; and then there was a great deal to be said on both sides.

113 *"Everybody on the road had something to say"*

Then, Boxer gave occasion to more good-natured recognitions of and by the Carrier than half a dozen Christians could have done! Everybody knew him, all along the road—especially the fowls and pigs, who, when they saw him approaching, with his body all on one side and his ears pricked up inquisitively, and that knob of a tail making the most of itself in the air, immediately withdrew into remote back settlements, without waiting for the honour of a nearer acquaintance. He had business everywhere; going down all the turnings, looking into all the wells, bolting in and out of all the cottages, dashing into the midst of all the Dame-Schools, fluttering all the pigeons, magnifying the tails of all the cats, and trotting into the public-houses like a regular customer. Wherever he went, somebody or other might have been heard to cry, "Halloa! Here's Boxer!" and out came that somebody forthwith, accompanied by at least two or

three other somebodies, to give John Peerybingle and his pretty wife, Good Day.

The packages and parcels for the errand cart were numerous; and there were many stoppages to take them in and give them out; which were not by any means the worst parts of the journey. Some people were so full of expectation about their parcels, and other people were so full of wonder about their parcels, and other people were so full of inexhaustible directions about their parcels, and John had such a lively interest in all the parcels, that it was as good as a play. Likewise, there were articles to carry, which required to be considered and discussed, and in reference to the adjustment and disposition of which councils had to be holden by the Carrier and the senders; at which Boxer usually assisted, in short fits of the closest attention and long fits of tearing round and round the assembled sages and barking himself hoarse. Of

all these little incidents Dot was the amused and open-eyed spectatress from her chair in the cart, and as she sat there, looking on—a charming little portrait framed to admiration by the tilt—there was no lack of nudgings and glancings and whisperings and envyings among the younger men, I promise you. And this delighted John the Carrier beyond measure, for he was proud to have his little wife admired, knowing that she did n't mind it—that, if anything, she rather liked it, perhaps.

The trip was a little foggy, to be sure, in the January weather, and was raw and cold. But who cared for such trifles? Not Dot, decidedly. Not Tilly Slowboy, for she deemed sitting in a cart, on any terms, to be the highest point of human joys, the crowning circumstance of earthly hopes. Not the Baby, I 'll be sworn; for it 's not in Baby nature to be warmer or more sound asleep, though its capacity is great in both respects, than

"Other people were so full of inexhaustible directions about their parcels."

that blessed young Peerybingle was, all the way.

You could n't see very far in the fog, of course ; but you could see a great deal, oh, a great deal! It 's astonishing how much you may see, in a thicker fog than that, if you will only take the trouble to look for it. Why, even to sit watching for the Fairy-rings in the fields, and for the patches of hoar-frost still lingering in the shade near hedges and by trees, was a pleasant occupation; to make no mention of the unexpected shapes in which the trees themselves came starting out of the mist, and glided into it again. The hedges were tangled and bare, and waved a multitude of blighted garlands in the wind ; but there was no discouragement in this. It was agreeable to contemplate; for it made the fireside warmer in possession, and the summer greener in expectancy. The river looked chilly ; but it was in motion, and moving at a good pace, which was a great point. The

canal was rather slow and torpid; that must be admitted. Never mind. It would freeze the sooner when the frost fairly set in, and then there would be skating and sliding; and the heavy old barges, frozen up somewhere near a wharf, would smoke their rusty iron chimney-pipes all day and have a lazy time of it.

In one place, there was a great mound of weeds or stubble burning; and they watched the fire, so white in the daytime, flaring through the fog, with only here and there a dash of red in it, until, in consequence, as she observed, of the smoke "getting up her nose," Miss Slowboy choked—she could do anything of that sort on the smallest provocation—and woke the Baby, who would n't go to sleep again. But Boxer, who was in advance some quarter of a mile or so, had already passed the outposts of the town and gained the corner of the street where Caleb and his daughter lived; and long

before they reached the door, he and the Blind Girl were on the pavement waiting to receive them.

Boxer, by the way, made certain delicate distinctions of his own, in his communication with Bertha, which persuade me fully that he knew her to be blind. He never sought to attract her attention by looking at her, as he often did with other people, but touched her, invariably. What experience he could ever have had of blind people or blind dogs, I don't know. He had never lived with a blind master; nor had Mr. Boxer the elder, nor Mrs. Boxer, nor any of his respectable family on either side, ever been visited with blindness, that I am aware of. He may have found it out for himself, perhaps, but he had got hold of it somehow; and therefore he had hold of Bertha, too, by the skirt, and kept hold until Mrs. Peerybingle and the Baby, and Miss Slowboy, and the basket, were all got safely within doors.

May Fielding was already come, and so was her mother—a little querulous chip of an old lady with a peevish face, who, in right of having preserved a waist like a bedpost, was supposed to be a most transcendent figure; and who, in consequence of having once been better off, or of labouring under an impression that she might have been if something had happened which never did happen, and seemed to have never been particularly likely to come to pass—but it 's all the same—was very genteel and patronising indeed. Gruff and Tackleton was also there, doing the agreeable, with the evident sensation of being as perfectly at home and as unquestionably in his own element as a fresh young salmon on the top of the Great Pyramid.

"May! My dear old friend!" cried Dot, running up to meet her. "What a happiness to see you!"

Her old friend was, to the full, as hearty and as glad as she; and it really

was, if you 'll believe me, quite a pleasant sight to see them embrace. Tackleton was a man of taste, beyond all question. May was very pretty.

You know sometimes, when you are used to a pretty face, how, when it comes into contact and comparison with another pretty face, it seems for the moment to be homely and faded, and hardly to deserve the high opinion you have had of it. Now, this was not at all the case, either with Dot or May; for May's face set off Dot's, and Dot's face set off May's, so naturally and agreeably that, as John Peerybingle was very near saying when he came into the room, they ought to have been born sisters—which was the only improvement you could have suggested.

Tackleton had brought his leg of mutton, and, wonderful to relate, a tart besides—but we don't mind a little dissipation when our brides are in the case; we don't get married every day—and in

addition to these dainties, there were the Veal and Ham-Pie, and "things," as Mrs. Peerybingle called them; which were chiefly nuts and oranges, and cakes, and such small deer. When the repast was set forth on the board, flanked by Caleb's contribution, which was a great wooden bowl of smoking potatoes (he was prohibited, by solemn compact, from producing any other viands), Tackleton led his intended mother-in-law to the Post of Honour. For the better gracing of this place at the high Festival, the majestic old Soul had adorned herself with a cap calculated to inspire the thoughtless with sentiments of awe. She also wore her gloves. But let us be genteel, or die!

Caleb sat next his daughter; Dot and her old schoolfellow were side by side; the good Carrier took care of the bottom of the table. Miss Slowboy was isolated, for the time being, from every article of furniture but the chair she sat on, that

she might have nothing else to knock the Baby's head against.

As Tilly stared about her at the dolls and toys, they stared at her and at the company. The venerable old gentlemen at the street doors (who were all in full action) showed especial interest in the party: pausing occasionally before leaping, as if they were listening to the conversation, and then plunging wildly over and over, a great many times, without halting for breath,—as in a frantic state of delight with the whole proceedings.

Certainly, if these old gentlemen were inclined to have a fiendish joy in the contemplation of Tackleton's discomfiture, they had good reason to be satisfied. Tackleton could n't get on at all; and the more cheerful his intended bride became in Dot's society the less he liked it, though he had brought them together for that purpose. For he was a regular Dog in the Manger, was Tackleton; and when they laughed, and he could n't, he took

it into his head, immediately, that they must be laughing at him.

"Ah, May!" said Dot. "Dear, dear, what changes! To talk of those merry school-days makes one young again."

"Why, you an't particularly old, at any time; are you?" said Tackleton.

"Look at my sober, plodding husband there," returned Dot. "He adds twenty years to my age, at least. Don't you, John?"

"Forty," John replied.

"How many *you* 'll add to May's, I'm sure I don't know," said Dot, laughing. "But she can't be much less than a hundred years of age on her next birthday."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Tackleton. Hollow as a drum, that laugh though. And he looked as if he could have twisted Dot's neck, comfortably.

"Dear, dear!" said Dot. "Only to remember how we used to talk, at school, about the husbands we would choose. I don't know how young, and how hand-

some, and how gay, and how lively, mine was not to be! And as to May's—! Ah, dear! I don't know whether to laugh or to cry, when I think what silly girls we were."

May seemed to know which to do, for the colour flashed into her face, and tears stood in her eyes.

"Even the very persons themselves—real live young men—were fixed on sometimes," said Dot. "We little thought how things would come about. I never fixed on John, I 'm sure; I never so much as thought of him. And if I had told you you were ever to be married to Mr. Tackleton, why you 'd have slapped me. Would n't you, May?"

Though May did n't say yes, she certainly did n't say no, or express no, by any means.

Tackleton laughed—quite shouted, he laughed so loud. John Peerybingle laughed too, in his ordinary good-natured and contented manner; but his was a

mere whisper of a laugh to Tackleton's.

"You could n't help yourselves, for all that. You could n't resist us, you see," said Tackleton. "Here we are! Here we are! Where are your gay young bridegrooms now?"

"Some of them are dead," said Dot; "and some of them forgotten. Some of them, if they could stand among us at this moment, would not believe we were the same creatures; would not believe that what they saw and heard was real, and we *could* forget them so. No! they would not believe one word of it!"

"Why, Dot!" exclaimed the Carrier. "Little woman!"

She had spoken with such earnestness and fire that she stood in need of some recalling to herself, without doubt. Her husband's check was very gentle, for he merely interfered as he supposed to shield old Tackleton; but it proved effectual, for she stopped and said no

more. There was an uncommon agitation, even in her silence, which the wary Tackleton, who had brought his half-shut eye to bear upon her, noted closely, and remembered to some purpose, too, as you will see.

May uttered no word, good or bad, but sat quite still, with her eyes cast down, and made no sign of interest in what had passed. The good lady her mother now interposed: observing, in the first instance, that girls were girls, and bygones bygones, and that so long as young people were young and thoughtless, they would probably conduct themselves like young and thoughtless persons; with two or three other positions of a no less sound and incontrovertible character. She then remarked, in a devout spirit, that she thanked Heaven she had always found in her daughter May a dutiful and obedient child; for which she took no credit to herself, though she had every reason to believe it was entirely owing to herself.

With regard to Mr. Tackleton, she said, That he was in a moral point of view an undeniable individual; and That he was in an eligible point of view a son-in-law to be desired, no one in their senses could doubt. (She was very emphatic here.) With regard to the family into which he was so soon about, after some solicitation, to be admitted, she believed Mr. Tackleton knew that, although reduced in purse, it had some pretensions to gentility; and if certain circumstances, not wholly unconnected, she would go so far as to say, with the Indigo Trade, but to which she would not more particularly refer, had happened differently, it might perhaps have been in possession of Wealth. She then remarked that she would not allude to the past, and would not mention that her daughter had for some time rejected the suit of Mr. Tackleton; and that she would not say a great many other things which she did say, at great length. Finally, she delivered it as the general

result of her observation and experience, that those marriages in which there was least of what was romantically and sillily called love, were always the happiest; and that she anticipated the greatest possible amount of bliss—not rapturous bliss, but the solid, steady-going article—from the approaching nuptials. She concluded by informing the company that to-morrow was the day she had lived for, expressly; and that when it was over she would desire nothing better than to be packed up and disposed of in any genteel place of burial.

As these remarks were quite unanswerable—which is the happy property of all remarks that are sufficiently wide of the purpose—they changed the current of the conversation, and diverted the general attention to the Veal and Ham-Pie, the cold mutton, the potatoes, and the tart. In order that the bottled beer might not be slighted, John Peerybingle proposed To-morrow: the Wedding-Day, and called

upon them to drink a bumper to it before he proceeded on his journey.

For you ought to know that he only rested there, and gave the old horse a bait. He had to go some four or five miles farther on; and when he returned in the evening he called for Dot, and took another rest on his way home. This was the order of the day on all the Pic-Nic occasions, and had been ever since their institution.

There were two persons present, beside the bride and bridegroom elect, who did but indifferent honour to the toast. One of these was Dot, too flushed and discomposed to adapt herself to any small occurrence of the moment; the other, Bertha, who rose up hurriedly, before the rest, and left the table.

"Good-bye!" said stout John Peerybingle, pulling on his dreadnought coat. "I shall be back at the old time. Good-bye all!"

"Good-bye, John," returned Caleb.

He seemed to say it by rote, and to wave his hand in the same unconscious manner; for he stood observing Bertha with an anxious, wondering face, that never altered its expression.

"Good-bye, young shaver!" said the jolly Carrier, bending down to kiss the child, which Tilly Slowboy, now intent upon her knife and fork, had deposited, asleep (and strange to say, without damage), in a little cot of Bertha's furnishing; "good-bye! Time will come, I suppose, when *you* 'll turn out into the cold, my little friend, and leave your old father to enjoy his pipe and his rheumatics in the chimney-corner; eh? Where 's Dot?"

"I 'm here, John!" she said, starting.

"Come, come," returned the Carrier, clapping his sounding hands. "Where 's the pipe?"

"I quite forgot the pipe, John."

Forgot the pipe! Was such a wonder ever heard of! She! Forgot the pipe!

"I 'll—I 'll fill it directly. It 's soon done."

But it was not so soon done, either. It lay in the usual place, the Carrier's dreadnought pocket, with the little pouch, her own work, from which she used to fill it; but her hand shook so that she entangled it (and yet her hand was small enough to have come out easily, I am sure), and bungled terribly. The filling of the pipe and lighting it; those little offices in which I have commended her discretion, if you recollect, were vilely done, from first to last. During the whole process, Tackleton stood looking on maliciously with the half-closed eye, which, whenever it met hers—or caught it, for it can hardly be said to have ever met another eye, rather being a kind of trap to snatch it up—augmented her confusion in a most remarkable degree.

"Why, what a clumsy Dot you are, this afternoon!" said John. "I could have done it better myself, I verily believe!"

With these good-natured words he strode away, and presently was heard, in company with Boxer, and the old horse, and the cart, making lively music down the road. What time the dreamy Caleb still stood, watching his Blind Daughter, with the same expression on his face.

"Bertha!" said Caleb, softly. "What has happened? How changed you are, my darling, in a few hours—since this morning. *You* silent and dull all day! What is it? Tell me!"

"Oh, father, father!" cried the Blind Girl, bursting into tears. "Oh, my hard, hard fate!"

Caleb drew his hand across his eyes before he answered her.

"But think how cheerful and how happy you have been, Bertha! How good, and how much loved by many people."

"That strikes me to the heart, dear father! Always so mindful of me! Always so kind to me!"

Caleb was very much perplexed to understand her.

"To be—to be blind, Bertha, my poor dear," he faltered, "is a great affliction; but ——"

"I have never felt it," cried the Blind Girl, "I have never felt it, in its fulness. Never! I have sometimes wished that I could see you, or could see him; only once, dear father; only for one little minute; that I might know what it is I treasure up," she laid her hands upon her breast, "and hold here! That I might be sure I have it right! And sometimes (but then I was a child) I have wept, in my prayers at night, to think that when your images ascended from my heart to Heaven, they might not be the true resemblance of yourselves. But I have never had these feelings long. They have passed away and left me tranquil and contented."

"And they will again," said Caleb.

"But, father! Oh, my good, gen-

tle father, bear with me, if I am wicked!" said the Blind Girl. "This is not the sorrow that so weighs me down!"

Her father could not choose but let his moist eyes overflow; she was so earnest and pathetic. But he did not understand her yet.

"Bring her to me," said Bertha. "I cannot hold it closed and shut within myself. Bring her to me, father!"

She knew he hesitated, and said, "May. Bring May!"

May heard the mention of her name, and coming quietly towards her, touched her on the arm. The Blind Girl turned immediately and held out both hands.

"Look into my face, Dear heart, Sweet heart!" said Bertha. "Read it with your beautiful eyes, and tell me if the Truth is written on it."

"Dear Bertha, Yes!"

The Blind Girl, still upturning the blank sightless face, down which the

tears were coursing fast, addressed her in these words:

"There is not, in my Soul, a wish or thought that is not for your good, bright May! There is not, in my Soul, a grateful recollection stronger than the deep remembrance which is stored there of the many, many times when, in the full pride of Sight and Beauty, you have had consideration for Blind Bertha, even when we two were children, or when Bertha was as much a child as ever blindness can be! Every blessing on your head! Light upon your happy course! Not the less, my dear May—" and she drew towards her, in a closer grasp—"not the less, my bird, because to-day the knowledge that you are to be His wife has wrung my heart almost to breaking! Father, May, Mary! oh, forgive me that it is so, for the sake of all he has done to relieve the weariness of my dark life, and for the sake of the belief you have in me, when I call Heaven to

"Look into my face, Dear heart, ... and tell me if the Truth is written on it."

witness that I could not wish him married to a wife more worthy of his Goodness!"

While speaking, she had released May

"Have I deceived her from her cradle, but to break her heart at last!"

Fielding's hands and clasped her garments in an attitude of mingled supplication and love. Sinking lower and lower

down, as she proceeded in her strange confession, she dropped at last at the feet of her friend and hid her blind face in the folds of her dress.

"Great Power!" exclaimed her father, smitten at one blow with the truth, "have I deceived her from her cradle, but to break her heart at last!"

It was well for them that Dot, that beaming, useful, busy little Dot—for such she was, whatever faults she had, and however you may learn to hate her, in good time—it was well for all of them, I say, that she was there: or where this would have ended, it were hard to tell. But Dot, recovering her self-possession, interposed, before May could reply or Caleb say another word.

"Come, come, dear Bertha! come away with me! Give her your arm, May. So! How composed she is, you see, already; and how good it is of her to mind us," said the cheery little woman, kissing her upon the forehead. "Come away, dear

Bertha! Come! and here 's her good father will come with her; won't you, Caleb? To—be—sure!"

Well, well! she was a noble little Dot in such things, and it must have been an obdurate nature that could have withstood her influence. When she had got poor Caleb and his Bertha away, that they might comfort and console each other, as she knew they only could, she presently came bouncing back,—the saying is, as fresh as any daisy; *I* say fresher —to mount guard over that bridling little piece of consequence in the cap and gloves, and prevent the dear old creature from making discoveries.

"So bring me the precious Baby, Tilly," said she, drawing a chair to the fire, "and while I have it in my lap, here 's Mrs. Fielding, Tilly, will tell me all about the management of Babies, and put me right in twenty points where I 'm as wrong as can be. Won't you, Mrs. Fielding?"

Not even the Welsh Giant—who, according to the popular expression, was so "slow" as to perform a fatal surgical operation upon himself, in emulation of a juggling-trick achieved by his arch-enemy at breakfast-time—not even he fell half so readily into the Snare prepared for him, as the old lady did into this artful Pitfall. The fact of Tackleton having walked out, and, furthermore, of two or three people having been talking together at a distance, for two minutes, leaving her to her own resources, was quite enough to have put her on her dignity, and the bewailment of that mysterious convulsion in the Indigo Trade, for four-and-twenty hours. But this becoming deference to her experience on the part of the young mother was so irresistible that, after a short affectation of humility, she began to enlighten her with the best grace in the world, and, sitting bolt upright before the wicked Dot, she did, in half an hour, deliver more infallible domestic recipes

and precepts than would (if acted on) have utterly destroyed and done up that Young Peerybingle, though he had been an Infant Samson.

To change the theme, Dot did a little needlework,—she carried the contents of a whole work-box in her pocket; however she contrived it, *I* don't know,—then did a little nursing; then a little more needlework; then had a little whispering chat with May, while the old lady dozed; and so in little bits of bustle, which was quite her manner always, found it a very short afternoon. Then, as it grew dark, and as it was a solemn part of this Institution of the Pic-Nic that she should perform all Bertha's household tasks, she trimmed the fire and swept the hearth, and set the tea-board out, and drew the curtain, and lighted a candle. Then she played an air or two on a rude kind of harp, which Caleb had contrived for Bertha, and played them very well, for Nature had made her delicate little ear as choice a

one for music as it would have been for jewels, if she had had any to wear. By this time it was the established hour for

"Had a little whispering chat with May while the old lady dozed."

having tea, and Tackleton came back again, to share the meal and spend the evening.

Caleb and Bertha had returned some

time before, and Caleb had sat down to his afternoon's work. But he could n't settle to it, poor fellow, being anxious and remorseful for his daughter. It was touching to see him sitting idle on his working-stool, regarding her so wistfully, and always saying, in his face, "Have I deceived her from her cradle, but to break her heart!"

When it was night and tea was done, and Dot had nothing more to do in washing up the cups and saucers; in a word—for I must come to it, and there is no use in putting it off—when the time drew nigh for expecting the Carrier's return in every sound of distant wheels, her manner changed again; her colour came and went, and she was very restless. Not as good wives are, when listening for their husbands. No, no, no. It was another sort of restlessness from that.

Wheels heard. A horse's feet. The barking of a dog. The gradual approach

of all the sounds. The scratching paw of Boxer at the door!

"Whose step is that!" cried Bertha, starting up.

"Whose step?" returned the Carrier, standing in the portal, with his brown face ruddy as a winter berry from the keen night air. "Why, mine."

"The other step," said Bertha. "The man's tread behind you!"

"She is not to be deceived," observed the Carrier, laughing. "Come along, Sir. You 'll be welcome, never fear!"

He spoke in a loud tone, and as he spoke the deaf old gentleman entered.

"He 's not so much a stranger that you have n't seen him once, Caleb," said the Carrier. "You 'll give him house-room till we go?"

"Oh, surely, John; and take it as an honour."

"He 's the best company on earth to talk secrets in," said John. "I have reasonable good lungs, but he tries 'em,

I can tell you. Sit down, Sir. All friends here, and glad to see you!"

When he had imparted this assurance, in a voice that amply corroborated what he had said about his lungs, he added in his natural tone: "A chair in the chimney-corner, and leave to sit quite silent and look pleasantly about him, is all he cares for. He 's easily pleased."

Bertha had been listening intently. She called Caleb to her side, when he had set the chair, and asked him, in a low voice, to describe their visitor. When he had done so (truly now; with scrupulous fidelity), she moved for the first time since he had come in, and sighed, and seemed to have no further interest concerning him.

The Carrier was in high spirits, good fellow that he was, and fonder of his little wife than ever.

"A clumsy Dot she was, this afternoon!" he said, encircling her with his

rough arm as she stood removed from the rest; "and yet I like her, somehow. See yonder, Dot!"

He pointed to the old man. She looked down. I think she trembled.

"He 's—ha, ha, ha!—he 's full of admiration for you!" said the Carrier. "Talked of nothing else the whole way here. Why, he 's a brave old boy. I like him for it!"

"I wish he had had a better subject, John," she said, with an uneasy glance about the room,—at Tackleton especially.

"A better subject!" cried the jovial John. "There 's no such thing. Come! off with the great-coat, off with the thick shawl, off with the heavy wrappers! and a cosy half-hour by the fire! My humble service, Mistress. A game at cribbage, you and I? That 's hearty. The cards and board, Dot. And a glass of beer here, if there 's any left, small wife!"

His challenge was addressed to the old

lady, who accepting it with gracious readiness, they were soon engaged upon the game. At first, the Carrier looked about him sometimes with a smile, or now and then called Dot to peep over his shoulder at his hand and advise him on some knotty point. But his adversary being a rigid disciplinarian, and subject to an occasional weakness in respect of pegging more than she was entitled to, required such vigilance on his part as left him neither eyes nor ears to spare. Thus, his whole attention gradually became absorbed upon the cards, and he thought of nothing else until a hand upon his shoulder restored him to a consciousness of Tackleton.

"I am sorry to disturb you—but a word, directly."

"I 'm going to deal," returned the Carrier. "It 's a crisis."

"It is," said Tackleton. "Come here, man!"

There was that in his pale face

which made the other rise immediately and ask him, in a hurry, what the matter was.

"Hush! John Peerybingle," said Tackleton. "I am sorry for this. I am, indeed. I have been afraid of it. I have suspected it from the first."

"What is it?" asked the Carrier, with a frightened aspect.

"Hush! I 'll show you, if you 'll come with me."

The Carrier accompanied him without another word. They went across a yard where the stars were shining, and by a little side door into Tackleton's own counting-house, where there was a glass window commanding the ware-room, which was closed for the night. There was no light in the counting-house itself, but there were lamps in the long narrow ware-room, and consequently the window was bright.

"A moment!" said Tackleton. "Can you bear to look through that window, do you think?"

"Why not?" returned the Carrier.

"A moment more," said Tackleton. "Don't commit any violence. It 's of no use. It 's dangerous, too. You 're a strong-made man, and you might do Murder before you know it."

The Carrier looked him in the face, and recoiled a step as if he had been struck. In one stride he was at the window, and he saw—

Oh, Shadow on the Hearth! Oh, truthful Cricket! Oh, perfidious Wife!

He saw her, with the old man—old no longer, but erect and gallant, bearing in his hand the false white hair that had won his way into their desolate and miserable home. He saw her listening to him, as he bent his head to whisper in her ear, and suffering him to clasp her round the waist, as they moved slowly down the dim wooden gallery towards the door by which they had entered it. He saw them stop, and saw her turn,—to have the face, the face he loved so, so,

presented to his view!—and saw her, with her own hands, adjust the Lie upon his head, laughing, as she did it, at his unsuspicious nature!

He clenched his strong right hand at first, as if it would have beaten down a lion. But opening it immediately again, he spread it out before the eyes of Tackleton (for he was tender of her, even then), and so, as they passed out, fell down upon a desk, and was as weak as any infant.

He was wrapped up to the chin, and busy with his horse and parcels, when she came into the room, prepared for going home.

"Now, John, dear! Good night, May! Good night, Bertha!"

Could she kiss them? Could she be blithe and cheerful in her parting? Could she venture to reveal her face to them without a blush? Yes. Tackleton observed her closely; and she did all this.

Tilly was hushing the baby, and she

crossed and re-crossed Tackleton a dozen times, repeating drowsily :

" Did the knowledge that it was to be its wifes, then, wring its hearts almost to breaking ; and did its fathers deceive it from its cradles to break its hearts at last ! "

" Now, Tilly, give me the Baby. Good night, Mr. Tackleton. Where 's John, for Goodness' sake ? "

"He 's going to walk, beside the horse's head," said Tackleton, who helped her to her seat.

"My dear John. Walk ? To-night ? "

The muffled figure of her husband made a hasty sign in the affirmative ; and the false stranger and the little nurse being in their places, the old horse moved off. Boxer, the unconscious Boxer, running on before, running back, running round and round the cart, and barking as triumphantly and merrily as ever.

When Tackleton had gone off, likewise, escorting May and her mother home, poor

Caleb sat down by the fire beside his daughter, anxious and remorseful at the core, and still saying in his wistful contemplation of her, "Have I deceived her from her cradle, but to break her heart at last!"

The toys that had been set in motion for the Baby had all stopped and run down, long ago. In the faint light and silence, the imperturbably calm dolls, the agitated rocking-horses with distended eyes and nostrils, the old gentlemen at the street doors, standing, half doubled up, upon their failing knees and ankles, the wry-faced nut-crackers, the very Beasts upon their way into the Ark, in twos, like a Boarding-School out walking, might have been imagined to be stricken motionless with fantastic wonder at Dot being false, or Tackleton beloved, under any combination of circumstances.

CHIRP THE THIRD

THE Dutch clock in the corner struck Ten when the Carrier sat down by his fireside. So troubled and grief-worn that he seemed to scare the Cuckoo, who, having cut his ten melodious announcements as short as possible, plunged back into the Moorish Palace again and clapped his little door behind him, as if the unwonted spectacle were too much for his feelings.

If the little Haymaker had been armed with the sharpest of scythes, and had cut at every stroke into the Carrier's heart, he never could have gashed and wounded it as Dot had done.

It was a heart so full of love for her, so bound up and held together by in-

numerable threads of winning remembrance, spun from the daily working of her many qualities of endearment—it was a heart in which she had enshrined herself so gently and so closely, a heart so single and so earnest in its Truth, so strong in right, so weak in wrong, that it could cherish neither passion nor revenge at first, and had only room to hold the broken image of its Idol.

But slowly, slowly, as the Carrier sat brooding on his hearth, now cold and dark, other and fiercer thoughts began to rise within him, as an angry wind comes rising in the night. The Stranger was beneath his outraged roof. Three steps would take him to his chamber-door. One blow would beat it in. "You might do Murder before you know it," Tackleton had said. How could it be Murder, if he gave the villain time to grapple with him hand to hand? He was the younger man.

It was an ill-timed thought, bad for the

"The Carrier sat down by his fireside. . . . troubled and grief-worn."

dark mood of his mind. It was an angry thought, goading him to some avenging act that should change the cheerful house into a haunted place which lonely travellers would dread to pass by night, and where the timid would see shadows struggling in the ruined windows when the moon was dim, and hear wild noises in the stormy weather.

He was the younger man! Yes, yes: some lover who had won the heart that *he* had never touched. Some lover of her early choice, of whom she had thought and dreamed, for whom she had pined and pined when he had fancied her so happy by his side. Oh, agony to think of it!

She had been above stairs with the Baby, getting it to bed. As he sat brooding on the hearth she came close beside him, without his knowledge,—in the turning of the rack of his great misery, he lost all other sounds—and put her little stool at his feet. He only knew it

when he felt her hand upon his own, and saw her looking up into his face.

With wonder? No. It was his first impression, and he was fain to look at her again to set it right. No, not with wonder. With an eager and inquiring look, but not with wonder. At first it was alarmed and serious; then it changed into a strange, wild, dreadful smile of recognition of his thoughts; then there was nothing but her clasped hands on her brow, and her bent head and falling hair.

Though the power of Omnipotence had been his to wield at that moment, he had too much of its Diviner property of Mercy in his breast to have turned one feather's weight of it against her. But he could not bear to see her crouching down upon the little seat where he had often looked on her, with love and pride, so innocent and gay; and when she rose and left him, sobbing as she went, he felt a relief to have the vacant place beside him rather than her so long-cherished presence. This

in itself was anguish keener than all—reminding him how desolate he was become, and how the great bond of his life was rent asunder.

The more he felt this, and the more he knew he could have better borne to see her lying prematurely dead before him with their little child upon her breast, the higher and stronger rose his wrath against his enemy. He looked about him for a weapon.

There was a Gun hanging on the wall. He took it down and moved a pace or two towards the door of the perfidious Stranger's room. He knew the Gun was loaded. Some shadowy idea that it was just to shoot this man like a Wild Beast seized him, and dilated in his mind until it grew into a monstrous demon, in complete possession of him, casting out all milder thoughts and setting up its undivided empire.

That phrase is wrong. Not casting out his milder thoughts, but artfully

[illegible] Changing them into
[illegible] Turning water
[illegible] Gentleness
[illegible] image—sorrow-
[illegible] heading to his
[illegible] resistless
[illegible] but staying
[illegible] raised the
[illegible] and nerved
[illegible] "Kill

[illegible] the stock
[illegible] lifted
[illegible] was in
[illegible] to fly,
[illegible]

[illegible] fire il-
[illegible] a glow
[illegible] Hearth

[illegible]—no
[illegible] so
[illegible]

her love for this same Cricket were once more freshly spoken; her trembling, earnest manner at the moment, was again before him; her pleasant voice—Oh, what a voice it was, for making household music at the fireside of an honest man!—thrilled through and through his better nature, and awoke it into life and action.

He recoiled from the door, like a man walking in his sleep, awakened from a frightful dream, and put the Gun aside. Clasping his hands before his face, he then sat down again beside the fire and found relief in tears.

The Cricket on the Hearth came out into the room, and stood in Fairy shape before him.

"'I love it,'" said the Fairy Voice, repeating what he well remembered, "'for the many times I have heard it, and the many thoughts its harmless music has given me.'"

"She said so!" cried the Carrier. "True!"

"'This has been a happy Home, John; and I love the Cricket for its sake!'"

"It has been, Heaven knows," returned the Carrier. "She made it happy, always,—until now."

"So gracefully sweet-tempered; so domestic, joyful, busy, and light-hearted!" said the Voice.

"Otherwise I never could have loved her as I did," returned the Carrier.

The Voice, correcting him, said "do."

The Carrier repeated "as I did." But not firmly. His faltering tongue resisted his control, and would speak in its own way for itself and him.

The Figure, in an attitude of invocation, raised its hand and said:

"Upon your own hearth——"

"The hearth she has blighted," interposed the Carrier.

"The hearth she has—how often!—blessed and brightened," said the Cricket; "the hearth which, but for her, were

only a few stones and bricks and rusty bars, but which has been, through her, the Altar of your Home; on which you have nightly sacrificed some petty passion, selfishness, or care, and offered up the homage of a tranquil mind, a trusting nature, and an overflowing heart; so that the smoke from this poor chimney has gone upward with a better fragrance than the richest incense that is burnt before the richest shrines in all the gaudy Temples of this World!—Upon your own hearth, in its quiet sanctuary, surrounded by its gentle influences and associations, hear her! Hear me! Hear everything that speaks the language of your hearth and home!"

"And pleads for her?" inquired the Carrier.

"All things that speak the language of your hearth and home *must* plead for her!" returned the Cricket. "For they speak the Truth."

And while the Carrier, with his head

upon his hands, continued to sit meditating in his chair, the Presence stood beside him; suggesting his reflections by its power, and presenting them before him, as in a Glass or Picture. It was not a solitary Presence. From the hearthstone, from the chimney, from the clock, the pipe, the kettle, and the cradle; from the floor, the walls, the ceiling, and the stairs; from the cart without, and the cupboard within, and the household implements; from everything and every place with which she had ever been familiar, and with which she had ever entwined one recollection of herself in her unhappy husband's mind—Fairies came trooping forth. Not to stand beside him as the Cricket did, but to busy and bestir themselves. To do all honour to Her image. To pull him by the skirts, and point to it when it appeared. To

"His thoughts were constant to her image."

cluster round it, and embrace it, and strew flowers for it to tread on. To try to crown its fair head with their tiny hands. To show that they were fond of it and loved it; and that there was not one ugly, wicked, or accusatory creature to claim knowledge of it—none but their playful and approving selves.

His thoughts were constant to her image. It was always there.

She sat plying her needle before the fire, and singing to herself. Such a blithe, thriving, steady little Dot! The Fairy figures turned upon him all at once, by one consent, with one prodigious concentrated stare, and seemed to say, "Is this the light wife you are mourning for!"

There were sounds of gaiety outside; musical instruments, and noisy tongues, and laughter. A crowd of young merry-makers came pouring in, among whom were May Fielding and a score of pretty girls. Dot was the fairest of them all;

as young as any of them, too. They came to summon her to join their party. It was a dance. If ever little foot were

"Such a blithe, thriving, steady little Dot!"

made for dancing, hers was, surely. But she laughed and shook her head, and pointed to her cookery on the fire and

her table ready spread, with an exulting defiance that rendered her more charming than she was before. And so she merrily dismissed them, nodding to her would-be partners, one by one, as they passed out, with a comical indifference, enough to make them go and drown themselves immediately if they were her admirers—and they must have been so, more or less; they could n't help it. And yet indifference was not her character. Oh, no! For presently there came a certain Carrier to the door, and, bless, her what a welcome she bestowed upon him!

Again the staring figures turned upon him all at once and seemed to say, "Is this the wife who has forsaken you?"

A shadow fell upon the mirror or the picture: call it what you will. A great shadow of the Stranger, as he first stood underneath their roof; covering its surface, and blotting out all other objects. But the nimble Fairies worked like Bees

to clear it off again; and Dot again was there. Still bright and beautiful.

Rocking her little Baby in its cradle, singing to it softly, and resting her head upon a shoulder which had its counterpart in the musing figure by which the Fairy Cricket stood.

The night—I mean the real night: not going by Fairy clocks—was wearing now; and in this stage of the Carrier's thoughts the moon burst out, and shone brightly in the sky. Perhaps some calm and quiet light had risen also in his mind, and he could think more soberly of what had happened.

Although the shadow of the Stranger fell at intervals upon the glass—always distinct, and big, and thoroughly defined—it never fell so darkly as at first. Whenever it appeared the Fairies uttered a general cry of consternation, and plied their little arms and legs with inconceivable activity to rub it out. And whenever they got at Dot again, and

showed her to him once more, bright and beautiful, they cheered in the most inspiring manner.

They never showed her otherwise than beautiful and bright, for they were Household Spirits to whom Falsehood is annihilation; and being so, what Dot was there for them but the one active, beaming, pleasant little creature who had been the light and sun of the Carrier's Home!

The Fairies were prodigiously excited when they showed her, with the Baby, gossiping among a knot of sage old matrons, and affecting to be wondrous old and matronly herself, and leaning in a staid, demure old way upon her husband's arm, attempting—she! such a bud of a little woman—to convey the idea of having abjured the vanities of the world in general, and of being the sort of person to whom it was no novelty at all to be a mother; yet in the same breath they showed her laughing at the Carrier for being awkward, and pulling up his shirt-

collar to make him smart, and mincing merrily about that very room to teach him how to dance.

They turned, and stared immensely at him when they showed her with the Blind Girl; for though she carried cheerfulness and animation with her wheresoever she went, she bore those influences into Caleb Plummer's home, heaped up and running over. The Blind Girl's love for her, and trust in her, and gratitude to her; her own good busy way of setting Bertha's thanks aside; her dexterous little arts for filling up each moment of the visit in doing something useful to the house, and really working hard while feigning to make holiday; her bountiful provision of those standing delicacies, the Veal and Ham-Pie and the bottles of Beer; her radiant little face arriving at the door, and taking leave; the wonderful expression in her whole self, from her neat foot to the crown of her head, of being a part of the establishment—a something

necessary to it, which it could n't be without; all this the Fairies revelled in, and loved her for. And once again they looked upon him all at once, appealingly; and seemed to say, while some among them nestled in her dress and fondled her, "Is this the wife who has betrayed your confidence!"

More than once, or twice, or thrice, in the long thoughtful night, they showed her to him sitting on her favourite seat, with her bent head, her hands clasped on her brow, her falling hair. As he had seen her last. And when they found her thus, they neither turned nor looked upon him, but gathered close round her, and comforted and kissed her, and pressed on one another to show sympathy and kindness to her, and forgot him altogether. Thus the night passed. The moon went down; the stars grew pale;

the cold day broke; the sun rose. The Carrier still sat, musing, in the chimney-corner. He had sat there, with his head upon his hands, all night. All night the faithful Cricket had been Chirp, Chirp, Chirping on the Hearth. All night he had listened to its voice. All night the household Fairies had been busy with him. All night she had been amiable and blameless in the Glass, except when that one shadow fell upon it.

He rose up when it was broad day, and washed and dressed himself. He could n't go about his customary cheerful avocations—he wanted spirit for them; but it mattered the less, that it was Tackleton's wedding-day, and he had arranged to make his rounds by proxy. He had thought to have gone merrily to church with Dot. But such plans were at an end. It was their own wedding-day, too. Ah! how little he had looked for such a close to such a year!

The Carrier expected that Tackleton

would pay him an early visit; and he was right. He had not walked to and fro before his own door many minutes, when he saw the Toy-merchant coming in his chaise along the road. As the chaise drew nearer, he perceived that Tackleton was dressed out sprucely for his marriage and that he had decorated his horse's head with flowers and favours.

The horse looked much more like a Bridegroom than Tackleton, whose half-closed eye was more disagreeably expressive than ever. But the Carrier took little heed of this. His thoughts had other occupation.

"John Peerybingle!" said Tackleton, with an air of condolence. "My good fellow, how do you find yourself this morning?"

"I have had but a poor night, Master Tackleton," returned the Carrier, shaking his head; "for I have been a good deal disturbed in my mind. But it 's over now! Can you spare

me half an hour or so, for some private talk?"

"I came on purpose," returned Tackleton, alighting. "Never mind the horse. He 'll stand quiet enough, with the reins over this post, if you 'll give him a mouthful of hay."

The Carrier having brought it from his stable and set it before him, they turned into the house.

"You are not married before noon," he said, "I think?"

"No," answered Tackleton. "Plenty of time. Plenty of time."

When they entered the kitchen, Tilly Slowboy was rapping at the Stranger's door, which was only removed from it by a few steps. One of her very red eyes (for Tilly had been crying all night long, because her mistress cried) was at the keyhole, and she was knocking very loud, and seemed frightened.

"If you please, I can't make nobody hear," said Tilly, looking round. "I

hope nobody an't gone and been and died, if you please!"

This philanthropic wish Miss Slowboy emphasised with various new raps and kicks at the door; which led to no result, whatever.

"Shall I go?" said Tackleton. "It's curious."

The Carrier, who had turned his face from the door, signed to him to go if he would.

So Tackleton went to Tilly Slowboy's relief; and he, too, kicked and knocked, and he too failed to get the least reply. But he thought of trying the handle of the door, and, as it opened easily, he peeped in, looked in, went in; and soon came running out again.

"John Peerybingle," said Tackleton, in his ear. "I hope there has been nothing—nothing rash in the night."

The Carrier turned upon him quickly.

"Because he 's gone!" said Tackleton; "and the window 's open. I don't

see any marks—to be sure it 's almost on a level with the garden, but I was afraid there might have been some — some scuffle. Eh?"

He nearly shut up the expressive eye altogether, he looked at him so hard. And he gave his eye, and his face, and his whole person, a sharp twist. As if he would have screwed the truth out of him.

"Make yourself easy," said the Carrier. "He went into that room last night without harm in word or deed from me, and no one has entered it since. He is away of his own free will. I 'd go out gladly at that door, and beg my bread from house to house for life, if I could so change the past that he had never come. But he has come and gone. And I have done with him!"

"Oh!—Well, I think he has got off pretty easy," said Tackleton, taking a chair.

The sneer was lost upon the Carrier,

who sat down too, and shaded his face with his hand, for some little time, before proceeding.

"You showed me last night," he said at length, "my wife; my wife that I love; secretly——"

"And tenderly," insinuated Tackleton.

"Conniving at that man's disguise, and giving him opportunities of meeting her alone. I think there 's no sight I would n't have rather seen than that. I think there 's no man in the world I would n't have rather had to show it me."

"I confess to having had my suspicions always," said Tackleton. "And that has made me objectionable here, I know."

"But as you did show it me," pursued the Carrier, not minding him; and as you saw her, my wife, my wife that I love"—his voice, and eye, and hand grew steadier and firmer as he repeated these words, evidently in pursuance of a

steadfast purpose—"as you saw her at this disadvantage, it is right and just that you should also see with my eyes, and look into my breast, and know what my mind is, upon the subject. For it 's settled," said the Carrier, regarding him attentively. "And nothing can shake it now."

Tackleton muttered a few general words of assent, about its being necessary to vindicate something or other; but he was overawed by the manner of his companion. Plain and unpolished as it was, it had a something dignified and noble in it which nothing but the soul of generous Honour, dwelling in the man, could have imparted.

"I am a plain, rough man," pursued the Carrier, "with very little to recommend me. I am not a clever man, as you very well know. I am not a young man. I loved my little Dot, because I had seen her grow up, from a child, in her father's house; because I knew how

precious she was; because she had been my Life, for years and years. There 's many men I can't compare with who never could have loved my little Dot like me, I think!"

He paused, and softly beat the ground a short time with his foot before resuming:

"I often thought that though I was n't good enough for her I should make her a kind husband, and perhaps know her value better than another; and in this way I reconciled it to myself, and came to think it might be possible that we should be married. And in the end it came about, and we *were* married."

"Hah!" said Tackleton, with a significant shake of his head.

"I had studied myself; I had had experience of myself; I knew how much I loved her, and how happy I should be," pursued the Carrier. "But I had not—I feel it now—sufficiently considered her."

"To be sure," said Tackleton. "Giddiness, frivolity, fickleness, love of admiration! Not considered! All left out of sight! Hah!"

"You had best not interrupt me," said the Carrier, with some sternness, "till you understand me; and you 're wide of doing so. If, yesterday, I 'd have struck that man down at a blow who dared to breathe a word against her, to-day I 'd set my foot upon his face, if he was my brother!"

The Toy-merchant gazed at him in astonishment. He went on in a softer tone:

"Did I consider," said the Carrier, "that I took her—at her age, and with her beauty—from her young companions, and the many scenes of which she was the ornament, in which she was the brightest little star that ever shone, to shut her up from day to day in my dull house, and keep my tedious company? Did I consider how little suited I was to

her sprightly humour, and how wearisome a plodding man like me must be to one of her quick spirit? Did I consider that it was no merit in me, or claim in me, that I loved her, when everybody must, who knew her? Never. I took advantage of her hopeful nature and her cheerful disposition, and I married her. I wish I never had! For her sake; not for mine!"

The Toy-merchant gazed at him without winking. Even the half-shut eye was open now.

"Heaven bless her!" said the Carrier, "for the cheerful constancy with which she tried to keep the knowledge of this from me! And Heaven help me that, in my slow mind, I have not found it out before! Poor child! Poor Dot! *I* not to find it out, who have seen her eyes fill with tears when such a marriage as our own was spoken of! I, who have seen the secret trembling on her lips a hundred times and never suspected it

till last night! Poor girl! That I could ever hope she would be fond of me! That I could ever believe she was!"

"She made a show of it," said Tackleton. "She made such a show of it that, to tell you the truth, it was the origin of my misgivings."

And here he asserted the superiority of May Fielding, who certainly made no sort of show of being fond of *him*.

"She has tried," said the poor Carrier, with greater emotion than he had exhibited yet, "I only now begin to know how hard she has tried, to be my dutiful and zealous wife. How good she has been, how much she has done, how brave and strong a heart she has; let the happiness I have known under this roof bear witness! It will be some help and comfort to me, when I am here alone."

"Here alone?" said Tackleton. "Oh! Then you do mean to take some notice of this?"

"I mean," returned the Carrier, "to

do her the greatest kindness and make her the best reparation in my power. I can release her from the daily pain of an unequal marriage, and the struggle to

"'I mean,' returned the Carrier, 'to do her the greatest kindness, and make her the best reparation in my power. . . . She shall be as free as I can render her.'"

conceal it. She shall be as free as I can render her."

"Make *her* reparation!" exclaimed Tackleton, twisting and turning his great ears with his hands. "There must be something wrong here. You did n't say that, of course."

The Carrier set his grip upon the collar of the Toy-merchant, and shook him like a reed.

"Listen to me!" he said. "And take care that you hear me right. Listen to me. Do I speak plainly?"

"Very plainly indeed," answereed Tackleton.

"As if I meant it?"

"Very much as if you meant it."

"I sat upon that hearth, last night, all night," exclaimed the Carrier. "On the spot where she has often sat beside me, with her sweet face looking into mine. I called up her whole life, day by day; I had her dear self, in its every passage, in review before me. And upon my soul she is innocent, if there is One to judge the innocent and guilty!"

Staunch Cricket on the Hearth! Loyal household Fairies!

"Passion and distrust have left me!" said the Carrier; "and nothing but my grief remains. In an unhappy moment

some old lover, better suited to her tastes and years than I—forsaken, perhaps, for me, against her will—returned. In an unhappy moment, taken by surprise and wanting time to think of what she did, she made herself a party to his treachery by concealing it. Last night she saw him, in the interview we witnessed. It was wrong. But otherwise than this she is innocent if there is Truth on earth!"

"If that is your opinion—" Tackleton began.

"So, let her go!" pursued the Carrier. "Go, with my blessing for the many happy hours she has given me, and my forgiveness for any pang she has caused me. Let her go, and have the peace of mind I wish her! She 'll never hate me. She 'll learn to like me better, when I 'm not a drag upon her, and she wears the chain I have riveted more lightly. This is the day on which I took her, with so little thought for her enjoyment, from

her home. To-day she shall return to it; and I will trouble her no more. Her father and mother will be here to-day—we had made a little plan for keeping it together—and they shall take her home. I can trust her there, or anywhere. She leaves me without blame, and she will live so, I am sure. If I should die—I may, perhaps, while she is still young; I have lost some courage in a few hours—she 'll find that I remembered her and loved her to the last! This is the end of what you showed me. Now, it 's over!"

"Oh, no, John, not over. Do not say it 's over yet! Not quite yet. I have heard your noble words. I could not steal away, pretending to be ignorant of what has affected me with such deep gratitude. Do not say it 's over, till the clock has struck again!"

She had entered shortly after Tackleton, and had remained there. She never looked at Tackleton, but fixed her eyes upon her husband. But she kept away

from him, setting as wide a space as possible between them; and, though she spoke with most impassioned earnestness, she went no nearer to him even then. How different in this from her old self!

"No hand can make the clock which will strike again for me the hours that are gone," replied the Carrier, with a faint smile. "But let it be so, if you will, my dear. It will strike soon. It's of little matter what we say. I 'd try to please you in a harder case than that."

"Well!" muttered Tackleton. "I must be off, for when the clock strikes again it 'll be necessary for me to be upon my way to church. Good morning, John Peerybingle. I 'm sorry to be deprived of the pleasure of your company. Sorry for the loss, and the occasion of it, too!"

"I have spoken plainly?" said the Carrier, accompanying him to the door.

"Oh, quite!"

"And you 'll remember what I have said?"

"Why, if you compel me to make the observation," said Tackleton, previously taking the precaution of getting into his chaise, "I must say that it was so very unexpected that I 'm far from being likely to forget it."

"The better for us both," returned the Carrier. "Good-bye. I give you joy!"

"I wish I could give it to *you*," said Tackleton. "As I can't—thank 'ee. Between ourselves (as I told you before, eh?) I don't much think I shall have the less joy in my married life because May has n't been too officious about me, and too demonstrative. Good-bye! Take care of yourself."

The Carrier stood looking after him until he was smaller in the distance than his horse's flowers and favours near at hand; and then, with a deep sigh, went strolling, like a restless, broken man, among some neighbouring elms, unwilling to return until the clock was on the eve of striking.

His little wife, being left alone, sobbed piteously; but often dried her eyes and checked herself to say how good he was, how excellent he was! and once or twice she laughed—so heartily, triumphantly, and incoherently (still crying all the time) that Tilly was quite horrified.

"Ow, if you please, don't!" said Tilly. "It 's enough to dead and bury the Baby, so it is, if you please."

"Will you bring him sometimes to see his father, Tilly," inquired her mistress, drying her eyes, "when I can't live here, and have gone to my old home?"

"Ow, if you please, don't!" cried Tilly, throwing back her head and bursting into a howl—she looked at the moment uncommonly like Boxer. "Ow, if you please, don't! Ow, what has everybody gone and been and done with everybody, making everybody else so wretched! Ow-w-w-w!"

The soft-hearted Slowboy trailed off at this juncture into such a deplorable

"His little wife being left alone, sobbed piteously. . . . 'Ow, if you please, don't,' said Tilly."

howl, the more tremendous from its long suppression, that she must infallibly have awakened the Baby and frightened him into something serious (probably convulsions) if her eyes had not encountered Caleb Plummer, leading in his daughter. This spectacle restoring her to a sense of the proprieties, she stood for some few moments silent with her mouth wide open, and then, posting off to the bed on which the Baby lay asleep, danced in a weird, Saint Vitus manner on the floor, and at the same time rummaged with her face and head among the bedclothes, apparently deriving much relief from those extraordinary operations.

"Mary!" said Bertha. "Not at the marriage!"

"I told her you would not be there, Mum," whispered Caleb. "I heard as much last night. But, bless you!" said the little man, taking her tenderly by both hands, "*I* don't care for what they say; *I* don't believe them. There an't

much of me, but that little should be torn to pieces sooner than I 'd trust a word against you!"

He put his arms about her neck and hugged her, as a child might have hugged one of his own dolls.

"Bertha could n't stay at home this morning," said Caleb. "She was afraid, I know, to hear the Bells ring, and could n't trust herself to be so near them on their wedding-day. So we started in good time, and came here. I have been thinking of what I have done," said Caleb, after a moment's pause; "I have been blaming myself till I hardly knew what to do or where to turn, for the distress of mind I have caused her, and I 've come to the conclusion that I 'd better, if you 'll stay with me, Mum, the while, tell her the truth. You 'll stay with me the while?" he inquired, trembling from head to foot. "I don't know what effect it may have upon her; I don't know what she 'll think of me; I don't know

that she 'll ever care for her poor father afterwards. But it 's best for her that she should be undeceived; and I must bear the consequences as I deserve!"

"Mary," said Bertha, "where is your hand? Ah! Here it is; here it is!" pressing it to her lips, with a smile and drawing it through her arm. "I heard them speaking softly among themselves last night of some blame against you. They were wrong."

The Carrier's Wife was silent. Caleb answered for her.

"They were wrong," he said.

"I knew it!" cried Bertha, proudly. "I told them so. I scorned to hear a word! Blame *her* with justice!" she pressed the hand between her own, and the soft cheek against her face. "No! I am not so blind as that." Her father went on one side of her while Dot remained upon the other, holding her hand.

"I know you all," said Bertha, "better than you think. But none so well as

her. Not even you, father. There is nothing half so real and so true about me, as she is. If I could be restored to sight this instant, and not a word be spoken, I could choose her from a crowd! My sister!"

"Bertha, my dear!" said Caleb, "I have something on my mind I want to tell you, while we three are alone. Hear me kindly! I have a confession to make to you, my Darling."

"A confession, father?"

"I have wandered from the Truth and lost myself, my child," said Caleb, with a pitiable expression in his bewildered face. "I have wandered from the Truth, intending to be kind to you, and have been cruel."

She turned her wonder-stricken face towards him, and repeated, "Cruel!"

"He accuses himself too strongly, Bertha," said Dot. "You 'll say so, presently. You 'll be the first to tell him so."

"He cruel to me!" cried Bertha, with a smile of incredulity.

"Not meaning it, my child," said Caleb. "But I have been, though I never suspected it till yesterday. My dear Blind Daughter, hear me and forgive me! The world you live in, heart of mine, does n't exist as I have represented it. The eyes you have trusted in have been false to you."

She turned her wonder-stricken face towards him still, but drew back and clung closer to her friend.

"Your road in life was rough, my poor one," said Caleb, "and I meant to smooth it for you. I have altered objects, changed the characters of people, invented many things that never have been, to make you happier. I have had concealments from you, put deceptions on you, God forgive me! and surrounded you with fancies."

"But living people are not fancies?" she said hurriedly, and turning very

pale, and still retiring from him. "You can't change them."

"I have done so, Bertha," pleaded Caleb. "There is one person that you know, my Dove——"

"Oh, father! why do you say, I know?" she answered, in a tone of keen reproach. "What and whom do *I* know? I who have no leader! I so miserably blind!"

In the anguish of her heart she stretched out her hands, as if she were groping her way; then spread them, in a manner most forlorn and sad, upon her face.

"The marriage that takes place to-day," said Caleb, "is with a stern, sordid, grinding man. A hard master to you and me, my dear, for many years. Ugly in his looks and in his nature. Cold and callous always. Unlike what I have painted him to you in everything, my child. In everything."

"Oh, why," cried the Blind Girl, tor-

tured as it seemed, almost beyond endurance, "why did you ever do this? Why did you ever fill my heart so full, and then come in like Death and tear away the objects of my love? Oh, Heaven, how blind I am! How helpless and alone!"

Her afflicted father hung his head, and offered no reply but in his penitence and sorrow. She had been but a short time in this passion of regret when the Cricket on the Hearth, unheard by all but her, began to chirp. Not merrily, but in a low, faint, sorrowing way. It was so mournful that her tears began to flow, and when the Presence which had been beside the Carrier all night appeared behind her, pointing to her father, they fell down like rain.

She heard the Cricket-voice more plainly soon, and was conscious, through her blindness, of the Presence hovering about her father.

"Mary," said the Blind Girl, "tell

me what my home is. What it truly is."

"It is a poor place, Bertha; very poor and bare indeed. The house will scarcely keep out wind and rain another winter. It is as roughly shielded from the weather, Bertha," Dot continued in a low, clear voice, "as your poor father in his sack-cloth coat."

The Blind Girl, greatly agitated, rose, and led the Carrier's little wife aside.

"Those presents that I took such care of—that came almost at my wish, and were so dearly welcome to me," she said, trembling, "where did they come from? Did you send them?"

"No."

"Who then?"

Dot saw she knew already, and was silent. The blind Girl spread her hands before her face again. But in quite another manner now.

"Dear Mary, a moment. One moment! More this way. Speak softly to

me. You are true, I know. You'd not deceive me now, would you?"

"No, Bertha, indeed!"

"No, I am sure you would not. You have too much pity for me. Mary, look across the room to where we were just now—to where my father is—my father so compassionate and loving to me—and tell me what you see."

"I see," said Dot, who understood her well, "an old man sitting in a chair, and leaning sorrowfully on the back, with his face resting on his hand. As if his child should comfort him, Bertha."

"Yes, yes. She will. Go on."

"He is an old man, worn with care and work. He is a spare, dejected, thoughtful, grey-haired man. I see him now, despondent and bowed down, and striving against nothing. But, Bertha, I have seen him many times before, and striving hard in many ways for one great sacred object. And I honour his grey head and bless him!"

The Blind Girl broke away from her, and, throwing herself upon her knees before him, took the grey head to her breast.

"It is my sight restored. It is my sight!" she cried. "I have been blind, and now my eyes are open. I never knew him! To think I might have died, and never truly seen the father who has been so loving to me!"

There were no words for Caleb's emotion.

"There is not a gallant figure on this earth," exclaimed the Blind Girl, holding him in her embrace, "that I would love so dearly, and would cherish so devotedly, as this! The greyer and more worn, the dearer, father! Never let them say I am blind again. There 's not a furrow in his face, there 's not a hair upon his head, that shall be forgotten in my prayers and thanks to Heaven!"

Caleb managed to articulate, "My Bertha!"

"And in my Blindness I believed him," said the girl, caressing him with tears of exquisite affection, "to be so different! And having him beside me, day by day, so mindful of me always, never dreamed of this!"

"The fresh, smart father in the blue coat, Bertha," said poor Caleb. "He 's gone!"

"Nothing is gone," she answered. "Dearest father, no! Everything is here —in you. The father that I loved so well, the father that I never loved enough, and never knew—the Benefactor whom I first began to reverence and love, because he had such sympathy for me—all are here in you. Nothing is dead to me. The Soul of all that was most dear to me is here—here, with the worn face, and the grey head. And I am NOT blind, father, any longer!"

Dot's whole attention had been concentrated, during this discourse, upon the father and daughter; but looking now

towards the little Haymaker in the Moorish meadow, she saw that the clock was within a few minutes of striking, and fell, immediately, into a nervous and excited state.

"Father," said Bertha, hesitating. "Mary."

"Yes, my dear," returned Caleb. "Here she is."

"There is no change in *her*. You never told me anything of *her* that was not true?"

"I should have done it, my dear, I am afraid," returned Caleb, "if I could have made her better than she was. But I must have changed her for the worse, if I had changed her at all. Nothing could improve her, Bertha."

Confident as the Blind Girl had been when she asked the question, her delight and pride in the reply and her renewed embrace of Dot were charming to behold.

"More changes than you think for may happen, though, my dear," said

Dot. "Changes for the better, I mean; changes for great joy to some of us. You must n't let them startle you too much, if any such should ever happen and affect you. Are those wheels upon the road? You 've a quick ear, Bertha. Are they wheels?"

"Yes. Coming very fast."

"I—I—I know you have a quick ear," said Dot, placing her hand upon her heart, and evidently talking on as fast as she could to hide its palpitating state, "because I have noticed it often, and because you were so quick to find out that strange step last night. Though why you should have said, as I very well recollect you did say, Bertha, 'Whose step is that?' and why you should have taken any greater observation of it than of any other step, I don't know. Though, as I said just now, there are great changes in the world—great changes; and we can't do better than prepare ourselves to be surprised at hardly anything."

Caleb wondered what this meant, perceiving that she spoke to him no less than to his daughter. He saw her, with astonishment, so fluttered and distressed that she could scarcely breathe, and holding to a chair to save herself from falling.

"They are wheels, indeed!" she panted. "Coming nearer! Nearer! Very close! And now you hear them stopping at the garden-gate! And now you hear a step outside the door—the same step, Bertha, is it not?—and now!"—

She uttered a wild cry of uncontrollable delight, and running up to Caleb put her hands upon his eyes as a young man rushed into the room, and, flinging away his hat into the air, came sweeping down upon them.

"Is it over?" cried Dot.

"Yes!"

"Happily over?"

"Yes!"

"Do you recollect the voice, dear Caleb? Did you ever hear the like of it before?" cried Dot.

"If my boy in the Golden South Americas was alive"—said Caleb, trembling.

"He is alive!" shrieked Dot, removing her hands from his eyes, and clapping them in ecstasy; "look at him! See where he stands before you, healthy and strong! Your own dear son! Your own dear living, loving brother, Bertha!"

All honour to the little creature for her transports! All honour to her tears and laughter, when the three were locked in one another's arms! All honour to the heartiness with which she met the sunburnt sailor-fellow, with his dark streaming hair, half-way, and never turned her rosy little mouth aside, but suffered him to kiss it, freely, and to press her to his bounding heart!

And honour to the Cuckoo, too—why not!—for bursting out of the trap-door in the Moorish Palace like a housebreaker,

and hiccoughing twelve times on the assembled company, as if he had got drunk for joy!

The Carrier, entering, started back—and well he might—to find himself in such good company.

"Look, John!" said Caleb, exultingly, "look here! My own boy from the Golden South Americas! My own son! Him that you fitted out and sent away yourself; him that you were always such a friend to!"

The Carrier advanced to seize him by the hand, but recoiling, as some feature in his face awakened a remembrance of the Deaf Man in the Cart, said:

"Edward! Was it you?"

"Now tell him all!" cried Dot. "Tell him all, Edward; and don't spare me, for nothing shall make me spare myself in his eyes ever again."

"I was the man," said Edward.

"And could you steal, disguised, into the house of your old friend?" rejoined

the Carrier. "There was a frank boy once—how many years is it, Caleb, since we heard that he was dead, and had it proved, we thought?—who never would have done that."

"There was a generous friend of mine, once—more a father to me than a friend," said Edward, "who never would have judged me, or any other man, unheard. You were he. So I am certain you will hear me now."

The Carrier, with a troubled glance at Dot, who still kept far away from him, replied: "Well! that 's but fair. I will."

"You must know that when I left here, a boy," said Edward, "I was in love, and my love was returned. She was a very young girl, who perhaps (you may tell me) did n't know her own mind. But I knew mine; and I had a passion for her."

"You had!" exclaimed the Carrier. "You!"

"Indeed I had," returned the other.

"And she returned it. I have ever since believed she did, and now I 'm sure she did."

"Heaven help me!" said the Carrier. "This is worse than all."

"Constant to her," said Edward, "and returning, full of hope, after many hardships and perils, to redeem my part of our old contract, I heard, twenty miles away, that she was false to me—that she had forgotten me; and had bestowed herself upon another and a richer man. I had no mind to reproach her, but I wished to see her, and to prove beyond dispute that this was true. I hoped she might have been forced into it, against her own desire and recollection. It would be small comfort, but it would be some, I thought, and on I came. That I might have the truth, the real truth, observing freely for myself, and judging for myself, without obstruction on the one hand, or presenting my own influence (if I had any) before her on the

other, I dressed myself unlike myself—you know how, and waited on the road—you know where. You had no suspicion of me; neither had—had she," pointing to Dot, "until I whispered in her ear at that fireside, and she so nearly betrayed me."

"But when she knew that Edward was alive, and had come back," sobbed Dot, now speaking for herself, as she had burned to do, all through this narrative; "and when she knew his purpose, she advised him by all means to keep his secret close, for his old friend John Peerybingle was much too open in his nature and too clumsy in all artifice—being a clumsy man in general," said Dot, half laughing and half crying—"to keep it for him. And when she—that 's me, John," sobbed the little woman—"told him all, and how his sweetheart had believed him to be dead, and how she had at last been over-persuaded by her mother into a marriage which the silly, dear old

thing called advantageous, and when she —that 's me again, John—told him they were not yet married (though close upon it), and that it would be nothing but a sacrifice if it went on, for there was no love on her side, and when he went nearly mad with joy to hear it, then she —that 's me again—said she would go between them, as she had often done before in old times, John, and would sound his sweetheart and be sure that what she —me again, John—said and thought was right. And it WAS right, John! And they were brought together, John! And they were married, John, an hour ago! And here 's the Bride! And Gruff and Tackleton may die a bachelor! And I 'm a happy little woman, May, God bless you!"

She was an irresistible little woman, if that be anything to the purpose; and never so completely irresistible as in her present transports. There never were congratulations so endearing and

delicious, as those she lavished on herself and on the Bride.

Amid the tumult of emotions in his breast, the honest Carrier had stood, confounded. Flying, now, towards her, Dot stretched out her hand to stop him, and retreated as before.

"No, John, no! Hear all! Don't love me any more, John, till you 've heard every word I have to say. It was wrong to have a secret from you, John. I 'm very sorry. I did n't think it any harm till I came and sat down by you on the little stool last night; but when I knew, by what was written in your face, that you had seen me walking in the gallery with Edward, and knew what you thought, I felt how giddy and how wrong it was. But oh, dear John, how could you, could you think so!"

Little woman, how she sobbed again! John Peerybingle would have caught her in his arms. But no; she would n't let him.

"Don't love me yet, please, John! Not for a long time yet! When I was sad about this intended marriage, dear, it was because I remembered May and Edward such young lovers, and knew that her heart was far away from Tackleton. You believe that, now. Don't you, John?"

John was going to make another rush at this appeal; but she stopped him again.

"No; keep there, please, John! When I laugh at you, as I sometimes do, John; and call you clumsy, and a dear old goose, and names of that sort, it 's because I love you, John, so well, and take such pleasure in your ways, and would n't see you altered in the least respect to have you made a King to-morrow."

"Hooroar!" said Caleb with unusual vigour. "My opinion!"

"And when I speak of people being middle-aged and steady, John, and pretend that we are a humdrum couple, going on in a jog-trot sort of way, it 's

only because I 'm such a silly little thing, John, that I like, sometimes, to act a kind of Play with Baby, and all that, and make believe."

She saw that he was coming; and stopped him again. But she was very nearly too late. "No, don't love me for another minute or two, if you please, John! What I want most to tell you, I have kept to the last. My dear, good, generous John, when we were talking the other night about the Cricket I had it on my lips to say that at first I did not love you quite so dearly as I do now— that when I first came home here I was half afraid I might n't learn to love you every bit as well as I hoped and prayed I might — being so very young, John. But, dear John, every day and hour I loved you more and more. And if I could have loved you better than I do, the noble words I heard you say this morning would have made me. But I can't. All the affection that I had (it was

a great deal, John) I gave you, as you well deserve, long, long ago, and I have no more left to give. Now, my dear Husband, take me to your heart again! That 's my home, John; and never, never think of sending me to any other!"

You never will derive so much delight from seeing a glorious little woman in the arms of a third party as you would have felt if you had seen Dot run into the Carrier's embrace. It was the most complete, unmitigated, soul-fraught little piece of earnestness that ever you beheld in all your days.

You may be sure the Carrier was in a state of perfect rapture, and you may be sure Dot was likewise, and you may be sure they all were, inclusive of Miss Slowboy, who cried copiously for joy, and, wishing to include her young charge in the general interchange of congratulations, handed round the Baby to everybody in succession, as if it were something to drink.

"It was the most complete, unmitigated, soul-fraught piece of earnestness that ever you beheld."

But now the sound of wheels was heard again outside the door, and somebody exclaimed that Gruff and Tackleton was coming back. Speedily that worthy gentleman appeared, looking warm and flustered.

"Why, what the Devil's this, John Peerybingle!" said Tackleton. "There's some mistake. I appointed Mrs. Tackleton to meet me at the church; and I'll swear I passed her on the road, on her way here. Oh! here she is! I beg your pardon, Sir; I have n't the pleasure of knowing you, but if you can do me the favour to spare this young lady, she has rather a particular engagement this morning."

"But I can't spare her," returned Edward. "I could n't think of it."

"What do you mean, you vagabond?" said Tackleton.

"I mean that as I can make allowance for your being vexed," returned the other, with a smile, "I am as deaf to

harsh discourse this morning as I was to all discourse last night."

The look that Tackleton bestowed upon him, and the start he gave!

"I am sorry, Sir," said Edward, holding out May's left hand, and especially the third finger, "that the young lady can't accompany you to church; but as she has been there once this morning, perhaps you 'll excuse her." Tackleton looked hard at the third finger, and took a little piece of silver paper, apparently containing a ring, from his waistcoat pocket.

"Miss Slowboy," said Tackleton. 'Will you have the kindness to throw, that in the fire? Thank 'ee."

"It was a previous engagement—quite an old engagement—that prevented my wife from keeping her appointment with you, I assure you," said Edward.

"Mr. Tackleton will do me the justice to acknowledge that I revealed it to him faithfully, and that I told him, many

times, I never could forget it," said May, blushing.

"Oh, certainly!" said Tackleton. "Oh, to be sure. Oh, it 's all right. It 's quite correct. Mrs. Edward Plummer, I infer?"

"That 's the name," returned the bridegroom.

"Ah, I should n't have known you, Sir," said Tackleton, scrutinising his face narrowly, and making a low bow. "I give you joy, Sir!"

"Thank 'ee."

"Mrs. Peerybingle," said Tackleton, turning suddenly to where she stood with her husband; "I am sorry. You have n't done me a very great kindness, but, upon my life, I am sorry. You are better than I thought you. John Peerybingle, I am sorry. You understand me; that 's enough. It 's quite correct, ladies and gentlemen all, and perfectly satisfactory. Good morning!"

With these words he carried it off, and

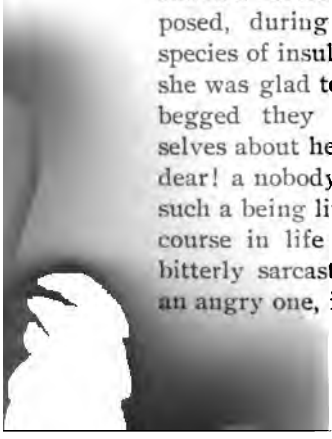
carried himself off too—merely stopping at the door to take the flowers and favours from his horse's head, and to kick that animal once in the ribs as a means of informing him that there was a screw loose in his arrangements.

Of course, it became a serious duty now to make such a day of it as should mark these events for a high Feast and Festival in the Peerybingle Calendar for evermore. Accordingly, Dot went to work to produce such an entertainment as should reflect undying honour on the house and everyone concerned, and in a very short space of time she was up to her dimpled elbows in flour, and whitening the Carrier's coat every time he came near her by stopping him to give him a kiss. That good fellow washed the greens, and peeled the turnips, and broke the plates, and upset iron pots full of cold water on the fire, and made himself useful in all sorts of ways, while a couple of professional assistants, hastily

called in from somewhere in the neighbourhood, as on a point of life or death, ran against each other in all the doorways and round all the corners; and everybody tumbled over Tilly Slowboy and the Baby, everywhere. Tilly never came out in such force before. Her ubiquity was the theme of general admiration. She was a stumbling-block in the passage at five-and-twenty minutes past two, a man-trap in the kitchen at half-past two precisely, and a pit-fall in the garret at five-and-twenty minutes to three. The Baby's head was, as it were, a test and touchstone for every description of matter — animal, vegetable, and mineral. Nothing was in use that day that did n't come, at some time or other, into close acquaintance with it.

Then, there was a great Expedition set on foot to go and find out Mrs. Fielding, and to be dismally penitent to that excellent gentlewoman, and to bring her back, by force if needful, to be happy

and forgiving. And when the Expedition first discovered her she would listen to no terms at all, but said an unspeakable number of times, that ever she should have lived to see the day! and could n't be got to say anything else, except "Now carry me to the grave"; which seemed absurd, on account of her not being dead, or anything at all like it. After a time she lapsed into a state of dreadful calmness, and observed that when that unfortunate train of circumstances had occurred in the Indigo Trade she had foreseen that she would be exposed, during her whole life, to every species of insult and contumely, and that she was glad to find it was the case, and begged they would n't trouble themselves about her,—for what was she? oh dear! a nobody!—but would forget that such a being lived, and would take their course in life without her. From this bitterly sarcastic mood she passed into an angry one, in which she gave vent to



the remarkable expression that the worm would turn if trodden on; and after that she yielded to a soft regret, and said, if they had only given her their confidence, what might she not have had it in her power to suggest! Taking advantage of this crisis in her feelings, the Expedition embraced her, and she very soon had her gloves on, and was on her way to John Peerybingle's in a state of unimpeachable gentility; with a paper parcel at her side containing a cap of state almost as tall, and quite as stiff, as a mitre.

Then, there were Dot's father and mother to come, in another little chaise; and they were behind their time; and fears were entertained; and there was much looking out for them down the road; and Mrs. Fielding always would look in the wrong and morally impossible direction; and being apprised thereof, hoped she might take the liberty of looking where she pleased. At last they came —a chubby little couple, jogging along in

a snug and comfortable little way that quite belonged to the Dot family; and Dot and her mother, side by side, were wonderful to see. They were so like each other.

Then, Dot's mother had to renew her acquaintance with May's mother; and May's mother always stood on her gentility; and Dot's mother never stood on anything but her active little feet. And old Dot—so to call Dot's father, I forgot it was n't his right name, but never mind—took liberties, and shook hands at first sight, and seemed to think a cap but so much starch and muslin, and did n't defer himself at all to the Indigo Trade, but said there was no help for it now; and, in Mrs. Fielding's summing up, was a good-natured kind of man—but coarse, my dear.

I would n't have missed Dot, doing the honours in her wedding-gown—my benison on her bright face!—for any money. No! nor the good Carrier, so jovial and so ruddy, at the bottom of the table. Nor the brown, fresh sailor-fellow,

and his handsome wife. Nor any one among them. To have missed the dinner would have been to miss as jolly and as stout a meal as man need eat; and to have missed the overflowing cups in which they drank The Wedding-Day, would have been the greatest miss of all.

After dinner, Caleb sang the song about the Sparkling Bowl! As I 'm a living man, hoping to keep so for a year or two, he sang it through.

And, by the bye, a most unlooked-for incident occurred just as he finished the last verse.

There was a tap at the door, and a man came staggering in, without saying with your leave, or by your leave, with something heavy on his head. Setting this down in the middle of the table, symmetrically in the centre of the nuts and apples, he said:

" Mr. Tackleton's compliments, and as he has n't got no use for the cake himself, p'raps you 'll eat it."

And with those words, he walked off.

There was some surprise among the company, as you may imagine. Mrs. Fielding, being a lady of infinite discernment, suggested that the cake was poisoned, and related a narrative of a cake which, within her knowledge, had turned a seminary for young ladies blue. But she was overruled by acclamation; and the cake was cut by May, with much ceremony and rejoicing.

I don't think anyone had tasted it when there came another tap at the door, and the same man appeared again, having under his arm a vast brown-paper parcel.

"Mr. Tackleton's compliments, and he 's sent a few toys for the Babby. They ain't ugly."

After the delivery of which expressions, he retired again.

The whole party would have experienced great difficulty in finding words for their astonishment, even if they had

"Tackleton himself walked in."

had ample time to seek them. But they had none at all, for the messenger had scarcely shut the door behind him when there came another tap, and Tackleton himself walked in.

"Mrs. Peerybingle!" said the Toy-merchant, hat in hand, "I 'm sorry. I 'm more sorry than I was this morning. I have had time to think of it. John Peerybingle! I 'm sour by disposition; but I can't help being sweetened, more or less, by coming face to face with such a man as you. Caleb! This unconscious little nurse gave me a broken hint last night, of which I have found the thread. I blush to think how easily I might have bound you and your daughter to me; and what a miserable idiot I was, when I took her for one! Friends, one and all, my house is very lonely to-night. I have not so much as a Cricket on my Hearth. I have scared them all away. Be gracious to me; let me join this happy party!"

He was at home in five minutes. You never saw such a fellow. What *had* he been doing with himself all his life, never to have known before his great capacity of being jovial! Or what had the Fairies been doing with him, to have effected such a change!

"John! you won't send me home this evening, will you?" whispered Dot.

He had been very near it though!

There wanted but one living creature to make the party complete, and, in the twinkling of an eye, there he was—very thirsty with hard running, and engaged in hopeless endeavours to squeeze his head into a narrow pitcher. He had gone with the cart to its journey's end, very much disgusted with the absence of his master, and stupendously rebellious to the Deputy. After lingering about the stable for some little time, vainly attempting to incite the old horse to the mutinous act of returning on his own account, he had walked into the tap-room

and laid himself down before the fire. But, suddenly yielding to the conviction that the Deputy was a humbug, and must be abandoned, he had got up again, turned tail, and come home.

There was a dance in the evening. With which general mention of that recreation I should have left it alone, if I had not some reason to suppose that it was quite an original dance, and one of a most uncommon figure. It was formed in an odd way—in this way.

Edward, that sailor-fellow—a good, free, dashing sort of a fellow he was—had been telling them various marvels concerning parrots, and mines, and Mexicans, and gold dust, when all at once he took it in his head to jump up from his seat and propose a dance; for Bertha's harp was there, and she had such a hand upon it as you seldom hear. Dot (sly little piece of affectation when she chose) said her dancing days were over; *I* think because the Carrier was smoking his pipe

and she liked sitting by him best. Mrs. Fielding had no choice, of course, but to say her dancing days were over, after that; and everybody said the same, except May; May was ready.

So May and Edward get up, amid great applause, to dance alone; and Bertha plays her liveliest tune.

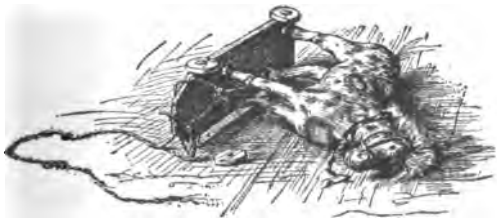
Well! if you 'll believe me, they have not been dancing five minutes, when suddenly the Carrier flings his pipe away, takes Dot round the waist, dashes out into the room, and starts off with her, toe and heel, quite wonderfully. Tackleton no sooner sees this, than he skims across to Mrs. Fielding, takes her round the waist, and follows suit. Old Dot no sooner sees this, than up he is, all alive, whisks off Mrs. Dot in the middle of the dance, and is the foremost there. Caleb no sooner sees this, than he clutches Tilly Slowboy by both hands and goes off at score; Miss Slowboy, firm in the belief that diving hotly in among the other

couples, and effecting any number of concussions with them, is your only principle of footing it.

Hark! how the Cricket joins the music with its Chirp, Chirp, Chirp; and how the Kettle hums!

. . . . . .

But what is this! Even as I listen to them, blithely, and turn towards Dot for one last glimpse of a little figure very pleasant to me, she and the rest have vanished into air, and I am left alone. A Cricket sings upon the Hearth; a broken child's toy lies upon the ground; and nothing else remains.



"A broken child's toy lies upon the ground: and nothing else remains."

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Ariel Booklets

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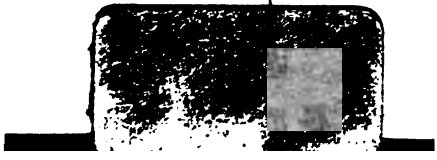

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